ON GUARD.

VOLUME III.

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A NOVEL.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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DOMESTIC BLISS.

WHILE Bella—his lost love, the sweet rock on which he had split, the wife of his friend, the one woman in the world to him—was wrangling with her sister-in-law and wrestling with her own spirit, Stanley Villars was walking slowly home through the dry, dusty streets, with his eye-balls burning and his temples feeling painfully compressed, and a general sensation over him of having been up all the previous night, and of having to be up all through the night to come.

He was very glad when he got away from the precincts of the Walsinghams' house, which was situated in a region where he might at any

moment come upon any member of his old set—at Princes Gate, namely. The walk across the park was pleasant enough in itself, but there were too many people still in town for him to walk there freely now. He sneered at himself for giving a thought to such things; but he was conscious of whiter seams than were well in his coat, and of a certain limpness about his hat that was aught but seemly in that place. He despised himself for doing it; but still he did avert his eyes, or abstractedly study the ground, whenever a carriage approached whose occupants might possibly know him.

When he reached the Marble Arch, he heaved a sigh of relief for that he was nearing home; not that home was a pleasant place to him, or, indeed, one from which he would not have abstained for ever could he have done so in honour, but simply because he was physically worn out, and he could not afford a cab. Besides, there was a shady side to the streets through which his way lay, and he could keep on that side, and so be more likely to evade observation.

There had been no slight courage in that determination which carried him over Claude Walsingham's threshold. He was a worn, haggard,

shabby man now, and he clearly saw himself to be what he was. It was no light thing to show himself in such a plight to those two. But he did it because he yearned so to see them again, and because he hoped that he should see that there was no longer semblance of a cause for that appeal which he had fancied he detected in Bella's letter.

He had not found the meeting pleasant. He had never anticipated its being that, indeed; but it had been wanting in so much that should have been there. Bella had been what she always must be; her nature would not admit of her being other than warm and womanly. But Claude's manner had said plainly, "My dear fellow, you've put yourself out of the pale. Can I do anything for you? If so, mention it; if not, the sooner we part the pleasanter for both parties."

He thought over this manner of Claude's; he looked at it in every light as he shambled àlong Oxford Street. I use the word shamble advisedly; the gait indicated by it is not uncommon in men who have been utterly worsted, and who still have to keep going, loathing the onus humanity lays upon them of struggling for life, envying the desolate dogs who lie down in the gutter and die at their ease.

"Perhaps after all Claude was right." He tried to think him right, for their ways of life were so different; they were so utterly separated in reality that occasional communion in seeming could only prove painful to both. But after all that had come and gone, by the memory of their boyhood, by the pleasure and the pain they had been to one another, by the love they both had felt for one object, by the doubt and agony, by the thousand nameless things which had been and were not, Claude's manner of showing him this should have had more manliness in it.

Presently he turned out of Oxford Street to the right, and shortly came to a street near the Strand that had a living pattern of infant Arabs in its centre, and a border of broken windows, in the majority of which there were attractive announcements respecting accommodation for single men. It was a disheartening street! How vividly, with what frightful force, it contrasted with the surroundings of the house at which he had been calling!

The day, bright as it had been beyond, seemed gloomy in this street. The sun did not find it worth his while to smile upon so doleful a corner of the earth. There were a vast number of women

moving hither and thither in it, in that marvellous manner peculiar to the sex in these shades—of appearing to be going for something which they are not likely get. There was a man with a flute and a wry neck walking its length to his own sorrowful strains. There were several dispirited cats, whose case was too sad for them to care to keep their paws clean. Beyond these there were no signs of life in the street down which Stanley Villars walked to his own door.

When he reached it he gave an impatient knock; he was eager to get in, and no wonder. The position he occupied while waiting for admission was not an agreeable one for a moderately sensitive man. Sundry heads came out of the windows of the houses immediately adjoining his own on either side, and a woman came on to the door-step of the opposite dwelling, affording her infant sustenance in the most Arcadian manner, the while she called to him that his "good lady had gone out and left the latch-key with her, and would he excuse her crossing with it, her feet being that swelled with the heat that she could scarce stand, far less walk."

He crossed over and got his key, and returned with it, cursing his degradation with deep and

bitter oaths. His hand trembled to such a degree that he had difficulty in getting the key into the door, and a street boy marked his bungling efforts and chaffed him freely on the subject in the street-boy style.

He opened it at last and got into his own house, to the place that was his sole sanctuary—his home. A narrow, little, stifling passage led to a low, stifling, little room, in which there was dust and disarray and stuffiness; and yet despite all these, some trifling evidences of a woman's presence. A long table in the corner covered with papers, books, and slips, with stubby pens and grimy ink-bottles, with uncorrected proofs, with recent novels to review, with suspicious-looking letters, over which there was that unwholesome shade of blue which bespeaks the bill, with dust and dead flies, with the pitiable litter, in fact, which distinguishes the careless, uncared-for "literary man's" writing-table. A little piano in a recess by the fireplace, a workstand near it, and a low lounge chair and footstool in close proximity to the stand, indicating a woman's presence habitually in that room—a round centre-table, with a soiled green cloth very much awry upon it—a few despondent chairs that seemed to

say, "Sit upon me, do; but I'm very uncomfortable"—pale green chintz curtains to the windows, that looked as though they had been put to that test which Shetland shawls proudly assert they can stand, namely, being passed through a ring—a small effort at colour and cleanliness, in the shape of a pink paper cut into a honeycomb pattern and draped round a chimney-glass, that gave the rash one who gazed in it one swollen cheek and one oblique eye—an abrupt cessation from all such effort immediately the precincts of that paper were passed,—this was all Stanley Villars found when he got home that hot August day.

Heavily he drew a chair along to the side of that table in the corner, and sat down, trying to fall to his work without further thought. He was a machine for turning out copy now. Every moment of his time—every effort of his brain—was brought up, and pretty well paid for on the whole. He had a hard day's work before him on the next month's instalment of that novel, the earlier chapters of which Bella was contemporaneously perusing. By the time that was done he would be due at the office of the daily paper for which he wrote; but the season was dull just then, and there was every chance of his soon

being released, instead of the latest telegrams bringing such news as would compel him to sit up half the night writing a leader that should be utterly passed over by many, and superciliously criticised by more, at the breakfast tables of the great majority, on the following morning.

But he could not work. The horror that crept over him as he felt that the time was stealing away, weighting every minute to come with a ghastly weight of work that he shrank from contemplating—the horror he felt at this was really one of those things that must be endured to be appreciated. But it was nothing; it was a weak, poor, puerile horror to that which seized his soul and stultified his brain, as the reflection arose that in his rash wrath at the downfall of his first idol he himself had marred his plan of life—had gone wilfully into the groove from which there was no escaping.

It was a soul-deadening thought. This wrong—this bitter wrong which had been done him—had been wrought by his own hand. He had given way, just as the veriest fool might have done to that feeblest passion which induces a man to revenge some injury, real or fancied, upon himself, if none other be by to bear the blow. He

had cast off those ropes and anchors which at the time he had deemed to be fetters, but which now he knew to have been merely saving responsibilities. He had gone to perdition at a slinging trot. He had taken the road from which there was no turning back—bound, as he was, hand and foot—clogged, as he was, through his own folly; so the faster he followed it the better.

As his bitter, distorted thoughts reached this point, he laid his head down upon his arms, and groaned in that bitterness of spirit—that weariness of body—that fainting of the soul—that doubting of its God—which parents had better strangle their children in the cradle than let them live to feel,—laid his head down and groaned over the folly of that despair which led him to believe that all was lost when a woman jilted him—that all was gone when his first scheme for life was proved faulty.

This knocking under—this breaking down and giving way—was owing much more to his pitiful surroundings than to the sight of *her*—the lovely rock who had wrecked him. Had he gone back to plenty and peace—to nothing to do and iced wine—to an earnest groom's doubt of a blood

mare's dam—to a coachman's groaning over the way the carriage "was kept out at night"—to any of the multifarious discomforts (!) of wealth, in fact, he might have held a gloomy debate in his soul on the Bella question, but he would not have groaned, and found the cup too bitter for him even to pray that it might pass away from him.

Time fleeted on—the shadows lengthened on the floor, and did not decrease in his heart; and at last he raised his head to the sound of a knock at the door, and knew that it was evening. He rose wearily to answer that knock, and struggled to throw off so much of the blackness he was steeped in as was in his eyes and on his brow. Then he went out into the narrow passage, and opened the door, and tried—and cursed his own weakness as he felt that he failed—to give something like a welcoming smile to the childish beauty wistfully glancing at him from the step, and to the solemn-faced dog, whose loving wisdom had taught him to keep close to his master's wife.

You will have guessed the secret—you will have decided what that step was which he had taken—remembering which, he felt himself to be in Bella's presence under false pretences. You will

have pierced through the tiny mystery I have made—you will have comprehended that the baby-faced beauty and Stanley Villars had cast in their lots together "for better, for worse."

Even so! He had gone there, to her quiet little house—to the doll's-house, where the doll had tended him so unweariedly—on that soft May evening, meaning to repay her with such measure as he had for that which she had done for him. He had found her absent, and all things altered. The peace and the quiet had fled, and in their place had come a doleful dread of what was to follow—a bitter sense of things being about to close over and swamp the butterfly-bark that had put out to sea so blithely, disregarding the idea of possible squalls.

He did not come in procession, as she had prognosticated; nevertheless, he was very eligible in Rayner's eyes. Accordingly, that well-meaning woman made the most of Miss Marian's forlorn state. For a while he had no very clear idea of what he ought to do in the case; but eventually it dawned upon him that he was called upon to refund, not only the actual filthy lucre which Marian had expended upon him, but something else that he had cost her.

He told himself, sitting there, and listening to Rayner's wails about Marian's woes, that he had nothing more to lose, let him do what he would. He was cut off utterly; truly, it was by his own hand, but still he was utterly cut off from his class and his kindred. If this poor little girl loved him—if she had indeed already lost something she could never regain through him—why should he not do all he could to repay and make her happy?

Why not?

He asked the question idly, and never stayed to hear his instincts answer, as they would have done had he not rushed along recklessly, bidding him beware of this worst, last folly of linking himself for the rest of his life with that for which his previous life had entirely unfitted him. He was a man, and he thought of her beauty, and told himself that he could not blight it, and that it behoved him, since he could do so, to lift the load that had come upon her through him. So when she came home he made her poor little heart happy, and let her perceive that she might love him without fear and without reproach. This was enough for her. She gave no thought to the strangeness of that wooing which accepted merely,

and offered nothing in return. He let her love him, but he neither loved her, nor lied to her about it. Still, she was satisfied, with a loving wealth of satisfaction that almost refined her for the time, and married him without a doubt as to the glory and grandeur of that fate which had commenced for her when she found him by the wayside, with his dog howling over him.

Not that he had deceived her as to his position. At one fell blow he had demolished the lordly mansions with which Rayner had endowed him, and had exploded the King Cophetua and Co. theories. He tried to make her understand that he was only a working man—a hard-working, ill-paid man. But she looked at his white hands, and her ears—so open to soft, sweet sounds—drank in the tones of his voice, and she disregarded everything that he said to her in a cautionary strain.

They were soon married, and he removed her from the doll's-house to a lodging in the heart of London that was more conveniently situated, in relation to his daily haunts. Rayner accompanied them, nominally as a servant, in reality as Marian's own familiar friend; and though Stanley Villars' sense told him that this was a natural

consequence of former conditions, it was a loathsome arrangement to him.

It must be admitted that Rayner was a trial. She would take no wages; she wept when he hinted that such being the case, she had better, in justice to herself, leave them, and left the room in a prominent manner whenever Mr. Villars came into it, in a way that made him feel himself to be a brute, he knew not why. Marian, too, had a habit of slinking out meekly after Rayner, evidently with the design of appeasing her aggrieved spirit, and causing her to feel that they were not *both* ungrateful. When he remonstrated with Marian for doing this—he having wanted her on one occasion—Mrs. Stanley Villars proved her inability to cope with circumstances, and adopt a medium manner, by becoming imperious to her self-sacrificing old friend, after the fashion of a "haughty lady," by whom she had been profoundly impressed, one blissful and never-to-be-forgotten night long ago on the boards of the Victoria Theatre. Then Rayner was resigned, and remorseful, and reproachful all at once, in a bewildering way, till Stanley Villars would have entreated her to take the seat of honour at his board and the upper chamber in his

mansion, had he had either, rather than be subjected any longer to poor Marian's laments over the impossibility of her "keeping Rayner in her proper place." At last things came to such a pass that he made another move, and told Rayner he could not afford such a luxury as she was any longer. At which dire decision, Rayner—whose love for the girl, to whom she had been as a mother, was strong and true—lifted up her voice and wept, and pressed the savings of a lifetime upon him earnestly.

Stanley Villars had realised his mistake even while in the act of making it. He had not stood at the altar, and called God to witness that there "was no just cause or impediment" to his marriage, as many better men do when something whispers them to the contrary. He had not forsworn himself before God. In his own heart there existed the impediment which, while it did exist, should have prevented his calling any other woman but Bella wife. He knew this, so he made their union binding and respectable by wedding Marian Wallis at a registrar office. But though there were no words to stay him on the occasion, he fully realised his mistake the whole time he was making it.

Perhaps you will understand more fully why he did so when you have seen a little more of Marian. A mere dry catalogue of his reasons for doing so from my pen would be worse than wasted.

"Where have you been, Marian?" he asked, as he opened the door. He did not ask it sternly or anxiously, as most husbands would of a beautiful young wife. He merely asked it because he felt that she expected him to speak to her, that he ought to speak to her, and he never knew what to say.

"I've been shopping. I hope you haven't been waiting for me long, Stanley," she replied, walking in before him, and pulling her bonnet off as she preceded him into the sitting-room.

"Not very long," he answered, returning to his writing, and taking up the pen, in which, truth to tell, the ink had been dry for more than two hours.

"I left the key with Mrs. Watts, over the way, and——"

"Why the devil did you?" he interrupted; "when I found you were not at home, I could have gone on somewhere; besides, if you were going out, you should have left the girl in."

"It was her half-holiday," Marian explained,

with a tremble in her voice. Though she was always jarring upon his finer feelings, and making him writhe, and feeling, poor thing! that she was doing these things, this man was as a god to her—a thing to love and tremble at, to adore and kneel before.

"Her half-holidays come devilish quick!" he muttered; and then he made another effort to send the pen over the paper, and found he could not do it.

"Can I have something to eat, Marian?" he asked, throwing himself back in his chair, and looking at her, as she stood smoothing her ruddy, glorious hair before the glass.

She stopped her evolutions suddenly, and glanced round at him.

"I'll go and get you something, Stanley. Haven't you had any dinner?"

He shook his head. "And I don't like you to get it for me in that nice dress," he said; "but I'm quite knocked up."

She brightened wonderfully; all the soul of the little milliner sparkled up into her soft blue eyes, and irradiated the lovely childish face, at his observation and praise of her dress.

"I won't hurt it, Stanley; I'll light this fire

and cook you a rasher," she said, with animation; but he had no appetite for a rasher, and she saw that he had not, in his face.

"Never mind, Marian; I'll get something to eat as I go down to the office." Then he took out his watch, and said he "must go presently, and she had better not sit up for him, as he might be late, and would have to write again when he came home."

She looked disappointed for a minute or two; it might be at the downfall of the rasher plan; it might be at the hearing that she would not have more of her husband's society that night. Whatever it was, it clouded her brow only for a minute or two. Then she brightened up again, and resumed her occupation before the glass, taking a delicate violet ribbon from her pocket, and passing it through her richly tinted hair with excellent effect.

She looked so very young, so innocently pretty, standing there, that he could but think of her tenderly and pityingly; could but think of her as she was individually, and not as a clog in relation to himself. In this uncongenial union of theirs, *he* only was unhappy, but *she* was equally alone. Dangerously, pitiably alone!

"Where did you say you had been, dear?" he asked, trying to speak as though he cared to know.

"Shopping," she replied, blushing a little; "and if you can wait, I'll tell you where, Stanley?"

He had risen, and was looking for his hat; but he ceased his search when she said that, and went up and kissed her, telling her "that, of course, he could wait." He pitied her so profoundly for being so utterly, hopelessly powerless as she was to efface the past from his memory—to make the present endurable—to shed one ray of warmth into the heart Bella Vane had chilled.

"I went to the place where I used to work," she began, hesitatingly, feeling her way, as it were.

"Ah, indeed! what for, dear?"

"Well, I want a bonnet, you know, so I thought I'd go there and order it; and while I was there ——" She stopped again, uneasily twisting her wedding-ring upon her finger, and growing full and flushed in the face, as a confused child does. She was quite conscious that she had gone to the old place in order to display herself as a married woman and a gentleman's wife to her old companions, and she half feared that he would fathom the motive and despise her, or be angry.

"And is this the new bonnet?" he asked, laughing, and taking up the one she had pulled off but just now.

"Oh, *dear*, no! the new one isn't home yet; but, Stanley, I saw some one there."

"Whom did you see?"

"Your sister, Flor—— Miss Villars," she answered, hastily correcting herself. He had only mentioned his sister Florence once, when she had asked him if he had any sisters. But this brief mention had been all-sufficient to show her that Florence was a very sacred thing in his estimation, one that might not even be looked upon lightly.

His brow darkened a little. "How did you know that it was my sister—Florence?" he asked.

"I'll tell you; you won't be angry?"

"Angry with you, child! God forgive me for having ever made you fear it!"

"I was in the show-room, and one of the young ladies who was great friends with me while I was there, asked me to show off some mantles to some good customers who were coming up."

"You didn't do it!" he exclaimed.

"Ye—es, I did."

"And it was Florence," he almost groaned.

"Oh, Marian! Well, don't mind me, dear; but don't do it again! How did you know her?"

"Miss Simpson (that's my friend, and I have asked her here) whispered to me that the young lady, the youngest lady, for they were both young, was Miss Villars, 'the same name as the gentleman you've married,' she said; for I'd told her all about you, and she *does* wish to see you so much, Stanley."

"God!" Stanley ejaculated.

"And then I heard the other lady call her 'Florence,' so I knew. Wasn't it funny? I wonder what she would have thought, if she'd known."

It was very funny, very funny indeed! So funny, that Stanley Villars almost staggered under the superb humour of it. His darling sister unconsciously accepting humiliating service from his wife, and the shop-girls speculating as to the similarity of name! Very funny!

"Marian," he said gravely, "you must not do that again; I'm not angry with you, dear, but I wish you not to do that again; you won't, will you?"

In dealing with this girl, whom he did not love, he never made use of the old authoritative

tone and manner which had so chafed Bella, whom he had adored.

"No, I won't," she said, promptly. "I've asked Miss Simpson—and—and—one or two of the others to come here to tea with me, Stanley; you won't mind that?"

What could he say? This society for which she sighed, was the society for which she was fitted; and he saw with unlucky clearness of vision that she would never be fitted for any other. "Not that it mattered, for what other could she have, poor little thing!" he thought. His own acquaintances—the men with whom he was thrown in daily contact—the men who shared and understood these later interests of his—scarcely noticed her at all, or, if they did, plainly regarded her as a pretty toy, which Stanley had been "weak, rather," to tie to himself so securely. She was nice to look at, but a bore when they had anything to do; for they often congregated about Stanley, he having a "local habitation and a name," they were good enough to remark; wrote their articles at his house, and gave themselves the freedom of it generally, in the frankness of that good fellowship which would have redeemed more faults than any of which these reckless,

harmless, clever young Bohemians were guilty. Sad as Stanley's worldly plight was, when compared with that of his past and his class, it was far better than that in which some of his brethren of the craft were plunged. The days were very dark for some of them; but they were struggling on through the darkness with the light-hearted, plucky determination to win their laurels, which is so frequent a characteristic of the bright brotherhood to which they belonged.

Stanley Villars felt that Miss Simpson's presence would not impart the flavour that was already wanting to make his wife acceptable to his guests. She was very much alone—more alone, perhaps, when he was with her, than at any other time. He had no plan for her improvement. He had no hopes of amending anything connected with himself. As she was, so he would leave her. He had put such a clog round his neck, that no amount of gilding on the padlock that secured it could dazzle the world to the extent of making it oblivious of the crushing weight it was to him. It would crush him down in time—the sooner the better; meanwhile it was useless to try and alter anything that was. So he swallowed his repugnance to the plan, and

promised Marian the exquisite bliss of seeing her friend whenever it seemed good to her.

Having made her happy so far, he whistled his dog and went away to dinner, if he could eat—to work, if work was to be done. It was a very rare thing for him to get anything to eat in his own house. The "girl" was always alarming her mistress into granting her half-holidays, and Marian always grew down-hearted when the subject of meals at home was mooted. Her share in the organisation of the doll's-house arrangements had obviously been very small, he learnt after Rayner's departure.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RATHER HARD.

It may have occurred to the reader while following this little history through the last few chapters, that Florence, whom I described as being singularly fond of and faithful to her brother, has but scantily proved the justice of her claim to these qualities. Naturally, I who know "what she means" do not so misjudge her. Equally naturally the majority will feel that "another of the characters has utterly broken down."

The fact is, after that one visit to her brother's lodgings—that one stolen indulgence in the literary sweets he was preparing for the delicate palate of that many-headed monster, the reading public—Florence found herself a sort of prisoner on parole. She was living under her brother Gerald's roof at this time, and her brother

Gerald's wife was, of course, her guardian and supervisor. Now Lady Villars had a habit of ill health—scarcely that, but of most extortionate delicacy. She was always in a state of verbal dread of being upset. She went a "little low" on the smallest provocation. She unselfishly bewailed these things on account of the effect they might have on her only child, the little heir. Sir Gerald was but a man and a baronet. He shrank from Carrie's being "upset," for many reasons that will be readily appreciated by husbands whose wives are addicted to disorganisations of the sort, and utterly unintelligible to the untried men who have had no such experience. He shrank from this as a man and a husband. As a baronet and father he was more sensitive still, therefore he cautioned Florence never to "put Carrie out," and Florence promised "not to do so," and forthwith became a white slave.

"I must *entreat* you never to go to Stanley's lodgings again, without telling me of your intention beforehand, Florence," Lady Villars said to her sister-in-law, shortly after Florry's first raid upon Stanley's premises.

Florence allowed herself to be entreated with

effect; but still, while acquiescing in the demand made on her obedience, ventured to ask "why?"

"I have my reasons, and you must attend to them, believing them to be good, even though I can't explain, dear." Carrie's reply was accompanied by a kiss; so the affectionate Florry tried to look her faith, but failed, poor child, in feeling it.

As time went on, and no answer came to the little imploring note she had left for Stanley on the top of his pile of MS., Florence began to feel cut to the heart, and doubtful of his love for her. At last she wrote to him again—she had given Gerald and Carrie no promise as to not writing—telling him unconsciously, for she was not given to complaint, how weary she was of this life she was leading; how willing to change it for one anywhere, anyhow, with him.

She had given no promise as to not writing, still she said nothing about this letter; not out of any desire for secrecy, but out of a dread of discussing Stanley and Stanley's doings with Carrie. Young Lady Villars was very hard upon her brother-in-law. It is difficult to determine what

feeling it was that biased her judgment so sternly against him. Whatever it was, the feeling was genuine. She did feel him to be a very faulty man—a man whose sufferings were surpassed by his sins—a man who deserved all he got, however bad it might be. She believed that he must have been well inclined for evil, to have seized so sharply upon the first excuse for going into it, as he had done. "He made being jilted a mean excuse," she said; "there had been but little good in him ever, or it would not have fled at the first wrong note that was struck in the melody of his life. Happily the family honour and family name were not *entirely* in his keeping." Then she would look at her little son, and feel more rigorous still towards Stanley if that little son looked pale or flushed, or anything unbecoming to an infant.

These things that were said of her favourite brother—of that brother who had been all that a man should be till Claude had played him false—were very hard for Florence to hear. She was a patient girl, and she gave but few signs of the sorrow that she felt. But her soft, tawny eyes—the eyes that were like a setter's in their tender,

loving beauty—would swim in tears that she would not suffer to fall lest "Carrie should be upset," and her heart ached to be with Stanley again.

She said nothing about the letter; but she laid it down with the family epistles on the hall table when she was going in to luncheon one day. Lady Villars, following her, stopped and read the superscription. Florence had been desirous only of evading conversation on the subject. She was careless as to whether Carrie saw the letter or not.

Lady Villars did not touch that letter—the purloining of other people's correspondence is not an attribute of the English ladies—but she went hastily back into the drawing-room, where she had left her husband sitting by the fire. It was a cold, April day—one of the days poor Stanley was passing in dreamy doubt in the doll's-house; it might, therefore, be the cold which imparted an extra glitter to Lady Villars' eyes, and a heightened flush to her round, fair cheek.

"Gerald," she began, hurriedly, "here's Florence writing again to Stanley! You must speak!"

"What shall I say? Oh, let her!" he replied, in a vexed tone.

"Say! *you* must know what to say. It's for Florence's good I'm anxious. You might give me credit for that." She sat herself down as she spoke, and looked as though she were going to be upset.

"So I do, dear," he replied, getting up and standing before the fire, and making a feeble effort to twist his moustache unconcernedly. "It's a difficult matter to interfere in. Dear old Stanley! I wish to God he'd come back and be with us again!"

"So do I, if he did but see the error of his ways. But to throw up his profession in that wicked way, and go off and lead a godless life as he is doing; I cannot think of him affectionately."

"A godless life! Come, Carrie, that's rather strong, you know."

"At all events, the life he leads is not the life you, as her guardian, ought to suffer that child Florence to know anything about."

Gerald made a faint protest: "Writing to her brother can't harm her."

"Writing! yes, as if it would end there. Florence has a tinge of romance about her; and if it gets inflamed, where are her prospects? Being spoken about with Claude Walsingham (another of Stanley's precious friends) did her no good. You *must* be careful of Florence, Gerald."

"So I will."

"Ay, but very careful. Florence is a little unhappy about that Claude still; and more than a little inclined to believe Stanley a noble martyr. Really the responsibility will be too much for me, if you *won't* assist me."

"What shall I do, Carrie? Play the tyrant, and forbid her writing to her brother and mine, because he's gone to the devil for a time about a woman? No, no!"

Lady Villars rose and went nearer to him, sinking her voice to a whisper nearly, but speaking energetically. "I tell you, Gerald, you *must*. He has formed a low connection."

"Whew! How do *you* know?" he asked, quickly.

"Pollock" (mentioning her maid) "heard of it in the show-room at Mrs. Mitchell's the other day. It's one of her girls. Now, fancy, Gerald!"

Carrie clasped her hands, and stretched them down before her as she spoke. She was one of those pinky-faced women, with short noses, who always look simple and well-meaning, whether they be so or not. The attitude matched the face; it was innocent and appealing.

"I can't fancy it," he replied. He could have believed any amount of downright depravity of Stanley just then, because he felt certain that Stanley's frame of mind was very sore and reckless. But a *liason* with a milliner's girl! He did his brother the justice of disbelieving it. He could not accredit Stanley with being guilty of such a fatal folly.

"But I know it, Gerald." How convincing Lady Villars' tones were when she wanted to convince. "I know it. Pollock will talk, you know——"

"Why the devil about my brother?" Gerald interrogated hastily. But Carrie went on—

"She will talk; and when I found that she had something to say I listened—something concerning Stanley, I mean."

"Deuced insolent of her!"

"Well, I confess I asked her, Gerald. She's

very right-thinking, and knows her place, and is thoroughly attached to the family; therefore when I found she knew something about Stanley, I *did* ask her. The girl is to be dismissed."

"Were there any truth in it she'd have dismissed herself. But let us go in to luncheon; Florry will be wondering, as well she may, why we stay."

Accordingly they went in to luncheon, and after it Gerald took occasion to tell Florry that "Carrie was very anxious about her—very much feared she was not happy, and—and—all that sort of thing."

"Not exactly unhappy, Gerald."

"Well, a good imitation of it, dear—pining after Stanley, we're afraid."

"And isn't that natural?"

She went up close to him as she asked it. She put both her hands on his shoulders, and bent her head down on his chest, then lifted it again suddenly, and looked into his face with her soft, loving eyes.

"And isn't that natural?"

It nearly upset his resolution. The fraternal element is very strong amongst us English, try to hide it as we may. But he remembered his wife,

and his heir. Carrie had told him that did he not assist her, "her responsibilities in this matter of Florence would be too much for her."

"Well, it is natural, my darling sister. Poor little Florence, don't cry; it will all be well in time, dear. Meanwhile it's better both for Stanley and for you that you shouldn't try to mix yourself up with him—indeed it is."

"I don't—believe—it," Florence sobbed.

"My dear Florry, it is—believe me." Then he began to feel weak of purpose before the strength of her love for that absent brother of whom they had hoped such bright things in his youth, and he struck an unfair blow.

"Doesn't Stanley tell you so himself by his silence?"

"No-o."

"Now, you're blind, Florry," he said gravely. "Had he thought it wise or well for you to see him, wouldn't he have acknowledged your visit and your note?"

Florence lifted her hands and her head away from him; but she was only stung, not conquered yet.

"Perhaps not. I know Stanley so well, Gerald:

he'd never be the one to come half-way to meet any one who didn't seem to want him very much."

"You have seemed to want him very much, and he hasn't come."

"*Don't*—don't make me doubt Stanley!" she cried, bursting out into a passion of tears that made Sir Gerald pity her, and himself, profoundly.

"I don't want to make you doubt him, dear! There, there, say no more about it! By Jove! what *is* a fellow to do? Florry, do be reasonable!"

She heaved and sighed in answer to this adjuration, but did not sob any more.

"It's so awkward to explain," he muttered. "The long and the short of it is, Florry, that you'd better not send that letter you've written to Stanley. Don't look at me as if I were your jailer. I'd better out with it, I suppose!" he continued, confusedly. "Stanley's not leading the sort of life you ought to countenance. There, I've done it now." He almost groaned as Florence turned away and sat down, looking very pale and terribly shocked, but speaking not a word.

"I'll send Carrie to you, dear," he said hastily,

kissing her brow. "Don't think about it: we'll have him back all right by-and-by. Meantime *don't* upset Carrie—there's a darling girl!"

"No, Gerald, no; I won't."

"Shall I send her to you—and the boy," he asked cheerily, walking to the door. "The boy," in his opinion, was an infallible panacea for every ailment, mental or bodily, that could assail humanity. He himself had found much comfort in perusing those infant lineaments at divers times. He offered him to Florence now as a perfect cure, and was rather astonished she didn't bound in spirit towards the acceptance of it.

He was very glad to get himself away out of his sister's presence. He felt that he had defiled it by aspersing Stanley to her—Stanley, with whom she had ever been so much more intimate—Stanley, who had always been so much "better a fellow" than himself. Sir Gerald had never made Florence his friend and confidante in his boyish scrapes, and in the dilemmas of his riper years. To touch upon this topic for the first time with her in relation to Stanley made him feel very unhappy, and ashamed of himself.

Shortly Lady Villars came to her, offering her

restoratives, and counselling warmth as though the chill she had received had been bodily. And Lady Villars enlarged upon the theme which her husband had merely broached, till Florence of the yielding spirit felt that Stanley was a being bad and dangerous to know—a thing to dearly love, and shrink from.

She gave up the letter, and saw it deftly rent into narrow strips, and then curled into matches between her sister-in-law's plump fingers, and she had to subdue her own sentiments at the sight, for Carrie was quite ready to be agitated and upset. In fact, she put herself under Lady Villars' plump little white thumb that day, and remained there while Lady Villars saturated her with wise saws and modern instances.

In the nursery in the evening Lady Villars had it all her own way with Florence more completely still. They sat by the fire, and passed little Gerald backwards and forwards from lap to lap till that unconscious little innocent had set the ball of good feeling and conversation rolling smoothly between them. Then Lady Villars mooted the matter again, and imparted additional poignancy to it by introducing Claude Walsing-

ham's name, till Florence, between her agony of dread lest the nursemaids should hear, and her agony of shame of what she had deemed the secret of her heart being known at all, was ready to promise anything.

"It is kinder in reality to keep entirely apart from Stanley now, Florry: indeed it is. He's more likely to stop on his road to ruin than if we countenanced him as though he were doing something very fine."

"I hope it may prove kindness, but it's harsh kindness."

"I little thought that I should ever have been accused of unjust cruelty by one member of Gerald's family in relation to another!" Lady Villars said, with touching resignation.

"I don't mean to accuse you, Carrie; indeed I don't!" Florence answered in an agony of dread. Lady Villars had an alarming power of going pale and contracting her nostrils, and these were usually held to be preliminaries to her being upset.

"It's uncommonly like accusing me, and it does hurt me when it is only *your* interest that I have at heart. Gerald and I are in such a posi-

tion that we might venture to do anything of the sort; but for you to appear to be vindicating Stanley *now*, when he's——"

Florence made a deprecating gesture with her hands; but Lady Villars only paused for an instant, and then resumed—

"Well, it would be simply wrong on our part to see you doing it and not to warn you; unjust to you and unkind to Stanley. He's far more likely to leave off evil doing if he finds that it cuts him off from us, than if we took no notice; to seek him would be to encourage him, and, if your love for Stanley is genuine, you won't do it."

If her love for Stanley were genuine! Florence made no answer in words, but she glanced, with a piteous reproach in her eyes, at her sister-in-law—a reproach that was so eloquent that even Lady Villars was touched by it. "Even Lady Villars," do I say; this implies a doubt of Lady Villars' integrity of purpose in this business, which I am far from feeling. The motives which influenced her were honest enough, only she was rather hard.

"There, Florry, I didn't mean to say that quite. I know *how* genuine your love for Stanley

is—therefore I feel sure that you will not refuse to put a little temporary restraint on your feelings, for his ultimate good."

"Ultimate good!" The phrase was a nice, magnanimous, well-sounding one. Florence was rather impressed by it on the whole. Of course she was quite ready to do anything that might conduce to Stanley's ultimate good.

So she was induced, through her love for him, to give up seeking for a renewal of intercourse with the brother who was under a cloud. So she was influenced to fall away from him outwardly for his ultimate good.

Some few days after this, Lady Villars told her, with a very well conceived casual air, that "the Walsinghams were in town! didn't she think it would be well to call?"

"No; I don't;" Florence replied, nervously.

"Why not? it would look better."

"I couldn't go!" Florence said, imploringly.

"My dear child, surely you are not going to bear malice against Bella all your life because she discovered, happily before it was too late (Lady Villars said this with virtuous fervour), that she did not love your brother?"

Florence made no answer. She was very truthful, and she knew that Bella's making this discovery had not been the worst offence towards herself. Lady Villars had some notion of this kind also; but she judged it better to ignore what would not be altered by mention.

"Oh! I'm sure you would not do that, Florry; I'm not Stanley's own sister, but I believe I know him well enough to be sure that he would not wish such a display of petty feeling. Of course you will go with me to call on her?"

"Why must I go, Carrie?"

"It would look pointed if you didn't; besides," Lady Villars went on, looking straight between Florence's eyes as she spoke, "people might make mistakes, and attribute your remaining away to a cause that you wouldn't care to have it attributed to. From every point of view"—(Lady Villars, in common with the rest of the world, merely meant her own, when she said this)—"from every point of view such a course would be unwise—unwise to the last degree."

Once more Florence permitted herself to be convinced; but she felt it to be rather hard that she should be put to the test in this way without

an end or aim, as it seemed. Meek and gentle, timid and soft as she was, she had that in her which would have carried her over hot ploughshares without shrinking, had the doing so been essential to the well-being of the one she loved. But her heart fainted within her at being thus called upon to perform a painful task, in order that people to whom she was indifferent might not attribute her letting said task alone to some bygone cause, in which, at least, there was no shame.

However, Lady Villars had set her heart on Florence going to call on Mrs. Claude Walsingham. Need it be said, after this statement, that Florence went.

On the whole, Mrs. Claude would far rather that they had not extended the olive branch in person just yet. She was much disturbed at the sight of them, and desperately uncertain as to what it would be well to talk about. With Lady Villars alone she would have been at her ease, for Lady Villars was great at forgiving other people's injuries. But with Florence she could not be at ease for several reasons. Florence had been down at Denham during the days of

doubt and of struggling. Florence had at one time held her own Claude's fickle fancy—had dearly loved him, and been wofully deceived by them both. With her usual pleasant power of putting away unpleasant thoughts, Mrs. Claude had thrown these facts off her mind while Florence was neither seen by or mentioned to her. But now, that Florence was before her in the flesh—and, alas! in less of it than of yore—Bella remembered vividly, and felt penitent and uncomfortable.

It was difficult to know what to speak about. Everything of which she could think had some relation—even if remote—to *the* subject which, she was morally certain, was occupying the thoughts of all. She wronged Lady Villars there, though! Carrie was thinking only of a pair of Venetian glasses, in antique silver frames, and wondering where Claude had got them.

The same difficulty was oppressing Florence with tenfold force. Say what she would, it was safe to refer to Claude, it seemed to her. In addition, too, the dread was upon her of Claude's coming in suddenly and finding them there. She began to wonder how he would look if he

did come in, and what he would say, and what he would think? These conjectures caused her to miss the thread of a poor little conversation that had been gallantly started—a conversation about dogs—not living dogs—but dogs of Dresden.

"Have you got Rock still?" she asked, thinking that by thus asking she was proving that she had taken an interest in and followed the subject.

Bella blushed a little, and one hand that was lying upon a table gave a convulsive twitch.

"No; I gave him to your brother, Stanley," she said, in a low tone, "when I married."

"How is Major Walsingham?" Lady Villars asked, quite cheerfully. And then Bella told them of the accident which had befallen him in the hunting field, and tried not to seem to see the tears that gathered in Florence's eyes as she listened. Mrs. Claude addressed herself to Lady Villars, as she told the story; but when she had finished it, there was a touch of true womanly feeling in the way she turned to Florence, and said, as one sure of sympathy, "I thought I should have lost my husband then!"

And that the sympathy she had sought was given, no one could doubt who saw Florence's face.

"Ah!" Lady Villars broke in adroitly, coming to the rescue with a bit of practicality that was invaluable at the moment. "Ah! I remember, Gerald was pitched into a ditch half full of water once, and we agreed then that in every field there ought to be a surgeon and a stomach-pump."

"They should be attached to the kennel, in fact," Bella said, laughing; and then the visit came to an end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STAB IN THE DARK.

Mrs. Markham brought her visit to a close almost immediately after that call Stanley Villars had designed so well, and executed so badly. She went back to a home that wanted her—to a husband who welcomed her—to duties that she performed with a flawless exactitude that may not be excelled; and when she was gone, Bella raised her arms over her head, and clasped her hands together, with a child's action of relief when its period of behaving with circumspection is over for a term.

Mrs. Claude breathed more freely when her sister-in-law left. She had never taken things easily—never gone her own way, and suffered her guest to do the like—as she would have done with any other relation or intimate friend. From

first to last she had treated Mrs. Markham with marked consideration; and the doing so had only been one degree more laborious to her than to Mrs. Markham.

Mrs. Markham had quickly detected this resolve of Bella's to be on guard against anything like careless intimacy with her, and to treat her with such grave, unremitting attention as should be shown by a well-bred hostess to a distinguished but not specially dear denizen of her house. There was nothing absolutely suspicious on the face of it in this. Nevertheless Mrs. Markham, failing to account for it in the right way, namely, by comprehending the simple truth, which was that Bella didn't like her, imagined that Bella feared her—consequently had cause for it.

But it was in vain she watched for a cause which should appear sufficiently strong, even to her prejudiced mind, to account for such fear. She watched and waited with a patient assiduity that almost ennobled her task, being truly zealous in the good work of detecting something that might make her brother miserable for life.

However, she watched and waited in vain. It might be a folly, but it could hardly be termed a

crime, that Bella should have written to Stanley Villars without her husband's knowledge. It was a misdirected literary taste which led her to peruse that same gentleman's works of fiction; but not a convincing proof of unholy affection for said gentleman. Even Mrs. Markham was obliged to admit these things, and that she had watched and waited in vain.

Friendship also made her warmly welcome on her return to her own sphere. Grace Harper was unfeignedly rejoiced to see her, and really made her feel that her stony society was a thing to be sought; and Grace was an attentive listener to all that had transpired in Major Walsingham's house, and to all that had *not* transpired, about Major Walsingham's wife.

"I am only sure of one thing, and that is, that it would have been a happy thing for my brother if he had never seen her," Mrs. Markham said, with a sort of solemn satisfaction in being able to fall back upon a strong sentiment that shall not be shaken, that is frequently adopted when facts fail.

Grace Harper looked up stolidly. In reality she was more excited on this subject than on any

other that had ever been brought under her notice; for Claude Walsingham was hale and handsome, powerful and passionate again now. She looked up stolidly, and said—

"Even now, if anything were found out, they might be separated, mightn't they?"

Eager as Mrs. Markham had been to find Bella unworthy in ever so small a degree—patiently as she had watched and waited for something wrong—the result of such finding and waiting had never shaped itself clearly in her mind before. The blood came up into her face, and she looked less hard than usual, as she asked—

"Do you mean divorced?"

"They would be, I suppose, if anything——" Grace was commencing phlegmatically, when Mrs. Markham burst in with—

"Pray God there may never be found a cause for it! Pray God such disgrace may be averted from my brother and our name! How could you, Grace? how *could* you say it?"

Miss Grace offering no explanation, Mrs. Markham went on—

"What right have you to judge her in that way—to suspect her, and think, because she has

been a flighty girl, that there is anything——" She stopped, choked by her anger and pride; and then Grace spoke.

"I only drew deductions from what you said yourself, and from those reports one can't take hold of and examine, about her way of going on when she was Miss Vane. I should be as shocked as you could be, Ellen, at anything befalling Claude."

In spite of this assertion of hers, Miss Harper's mind dwelt much on the subject of a separation between Major Walsingham and his wife. She found herself planning out a future for him, did such a thing occur, as she drove home after that visit to Mrs. Markham. In time his father would die. Her father had said but yesterday that "Walsingham, who appeared so well preserved, would probably break down suddenly, and go off, very much to the surprise of those who regarded him as looking so wonderfully well for his years." And when he died, Claude, his son, would reign in his stead.

Why, it might be very soon; and he might—would probably—settle at the Court, and take his place in the county. The Court would be a good

place to come to in order to get over the loss of his wife.

"The loss of his wife!" She started, stolid as she was, as the words formed themselves, and she thought them out. Then she comforted herself, telling herself that she was not wishing evil to Bella: separation, a divorce, might ensue from other causes than Bella being proved guilty.

Her brain was very busy during the rest of the journey. She saw herself mutely consoling a man who had been wronged by others, and in time rewarded by that man. Her brain was very busy, even when she reached home, and retailed to her father and mother during dinner the light, idle gossip of the uneventful day.

About a week after Mrs. Markham's departure, Claude and Bella had arranged to go out for a ride together, an unusual thing in those days, and one, therefore, for which Bella prepared herself in good time, in order that Claude might not be put to the trying test of waiting for her. The consequence of this precaution was that she was ready long before it had come to him to think about preparing to go out with her. Therefore, being in her habit, she had nothing for it but to

hang about between the rooms, and while away the time, while he kept her waiting.

She walked well and freely in her habit. The clinging cloth makes no manner of difference to the gait of the woman accustomed to it. She takes longer steps than are hers ordinarily, that is all. So it came about that she beguiled the tiresome time by moving about and altering the position of a few of her favourite ornaments, with whose place in the world she was never *quite* satisfied, as was natural. What woman is ever quite satisfied that the situation of the thing dear to her is not be improved upon? She walked about the drawing-room, therefore, happily enough for a while—as happily, that is, as any woman can walk about and waste the time, when she knows that her horse is awaiting her outside the door, and that the flies are teasing him, and making him impatient to be off.

At last she had moved all she could move in the room with effect. She had put the Venus de Medici on a broad crimson-backed bracket, and the life-size Clytie on a pedestal, and the Venus of Milo on a stand, where the glorious figure looked "not out of place"—she never can look that; but

sorry for the world that had no better place to offer her; grandly compassionate to its bad taste; loyally resigned to a false position.

When she had achieved these ends Bella grew petulant. "Claude *might* have remembered!" she muttered to herself. "Poor Devilskin! a sweet temper he'll be in when we do start, after waiting so long!"

She passed before a glass in order to tip her hat a bit more forward over her brow, and see if the stand-up collar set well. Then she picked up her gloves and whip, and walked with that long, sliding step so suitable to a habit, out of the room, and down into the hall, to be ready there "when Claude came."

The twelve o'clock postman knocked as she set her foot on the last stair, and she watched proceedings lazily, as the man who was waiting to let Claude and herself out took the letters in, and placed them on a salver on the hall table. It was a practice of hers never to open a letter in the middle of the day. The morning and evening were all sufficient for such toil. Experience had taught her that a letter lost nothing by waiting, and that answers to effusions which came in

haste at mid-day might always be deferred with safety.

However, she had nothing better—*i.e.*, pleasanter—to do now than to see what that post had brought her. So she walked idly up to the table, and commenced burrowing with her doe-skin covered hand (she always rode in doe-skin gloves, the reins did not slip through them) amongst the packet of letters that had just arrived. There were a lot for her husband. These she passed over, merely looking at his name without a second glance. She was a very faulty woman, this Bella; apt to forget what she ought to have remembered, and to remember what she ought to have forgotten. But she had no low curiosity. It was one of the articles in her erring creed of faith, that if her husband desired her to see a thing he would show it to her. If not, she would not seek for it. So now she tossed these letters of his over with a careless hand, and searched for any stray ones that might have arrived for herself, just to beguile the time.

Suddenly she came upon one in a long, narrow, cream-laid envelope, which she turned over leisurely, thinking that the seal or stamped mono-

gram would tell from whom it came, and so save her the trouble of reading it. There was no stamped monogram, however, and the seal was one of those puerile conceits which belong to nobody in particular. With one little, impatient glance at the stairs, down which Claude came not, she broke that seal away and read.

Such a letter! No civil invitation; no false form of inquiry; no friendly platitudes; no tradesman's puff! Any or all of these she would have counted tedious ten minutes before. Any or all of these would have been wildly welcomed by her in place of this miserable epistle which she held in her hand.

It commenced, "My dear Mrs. Walsingham;" and seeing this friendly commencement Bella was led on into the weakness of reading it before looking at the signature. Reading a portion of it—that is, an all-sufficient portion, since it made her brain reel, and her foot trip in her habit as she hurried upstairs again, and into the drawing-room she had been lounging about so pleasantly just now.

The letter told her of things that her brow burnt to read about; of things that her heart

sank to hear; of deeds which make a woman shrink from their perpetrator when that perpetrator is the woman's husband. All Claude's wild oats were brought in a sheaf and placed before her in this letter; and the jealousy of Lady Lexley, which she taught herself to consider unjust and unmeaning, was cruelly justified.

She was told of so many things, poor girl, that Claude would rather have blown his brains out than that she should have learnt. And she sat almost paralysed till she came to the end of the letter and found that it was anonymous.

So! she could not return it to the writer, as she had hazily resolved to do, without a word of acknowledgment. She could not meet her (Bella intuitively felt that it was penned by a woman), and cut her and scorn her as such a she-devil deserved to be cut and scorned. Agonised as she had been by that reading, paralysed as her faculties were for the moment, it had not occurred to her to take any other notice of this stab. But now she found that it was a stab in the back, and she must forego the taking such notice as that even.

For a few moments—they were only moments, but they were so long—the young wife sat un-

certain how to act. Then her colour and her heart rose, and she tore it into a hundred fragments, saying to herself, "Thank God, Claude need never know it!" This was her first active impulse. The doubt what to do had been merely born of passive pain—of bewilderment and surprise.

No! he should never know it! She took it all in now. The pain he would feel at her pain. The sore agony that would be his at her doubting him, or thinking that she had cause to doubt him. She shook off the devil of distrust, and, lighting a taper, burnt every scrap of the paper that had told the shameful tale to tinder, and was all herself again, bright, unclouded, sunny, and loving when he came down at last to ride with her.

She felt so sorry for having read such things about him! It seemed to her that she had been so far baser than Claude the exalted in appearance, would have been under the same circumstances. She had read on to the end. Claude would never have gone beyond the first line that aspersed her. The feeling of being so immeasurably beneath him in point of honour and generosity made her bear on the snaffle with a heavier hand than was her wont, and adapt herself less

readily to the curvature of the spine with which Devilskin marked his resentment of the change in her.

"Now, do be careful, Bella, and don't wobble," Claude said, somewhat testily. He was dearly fond of his wife, but they were going into the park now, and he desired that she should have a good seat in the eyes of all men. This spirit of exaction was only another form of the same deep love she was showing for him by her toleration in regard to this matter which had been thrust before her to-day.

Bella came down to her saddle tighter than before, as he spoke. She was conscious of an uncertainty of seat and hand this morning, that must, she felt, be equally trying to her husband and her horse. She wished so much to please him now—to please him entirely, and without reservation, and to make him feel that she was a good thing for a man to have, even though he had hankered after other things before her. She would no more now have suffered his heart to be made sore by a knowledge of that vile letter than she would have stabbed him with her own hand. It almost seemed to her, as she rode along

by his side, that she had been in error; that she had been the faulty one, to have received such a letter.

Who had dared to write it? Her heart swelled, and her small, well-bred hand grasped the reins with such convulsive energy, that the additional intensity of purpose in the rider communicated itself to the fine nerves of Devilskin's mouth, and caused him to concentrate himself, and break into a canter that was grand, as far as appearances went, but of little value where progress was concerned: his feet, that is to say, went up very high, and came down almost precisely in the same spot; and he arched his neck, and put at least ten pounds on himself by the way he carried his tail; and, altogether, made a very pretty little performance.

"I say, Bella! that won't do, you know!" Claude exclaimed, holding his own horse in with difficulty, and looking with annoyance at the very questionable effect his wife was producing on the minds of some bystanders. "Stop that Astley business, do!"

"Then I must give him his head, and then he'll bolt," she replied, getting Devilskin well

in hand as she spoke, and evidently not regarding the possibility of his bolting in a very serious light.

"No, he won't!—steady, boy, steady!—wo-ho, old fellow!" Claude answered, under the mistaken impression that his voice would show Devilskin the folly of it, whatever the "it" might be that Devilskin was contemplating.

"Come on Claude, then," she said, brightly, "don't stop at the top, but wheel, and give them a breather all the length of the Row." They were nearing the end of the row by Apsley House as she spoke, and when her husband had agreed, they drew nearer to the left hand rails; she lowered her hands, and the two horses went off at a fleet gallop, that seemed to bring their riders closer to the earth, and slackened the girths, and made the air whizz as they cut through it.

They reached the end, and wheeled cleverly, the two horses keeping stride for stride, and neither showing signs of taking trouble about it. Suddenly, both horses swerved; a woman was crossing, in the idiotic, temper-trying way women will cross the Row, regardless alike of the knees of the horses who are sweeping along, of the

necks of the riders, who get many an evil jerk through their means, and of their own stupidly-risked lives. As Tom Hood says, it must be "a horrible thing to be groomed by a horse." Nevertheless, innumerable women, all of the readily-confounded, easily-overpowered, and perpetually-surprised order, do apparently endeavour to test the horror of it daily throughout the season.

With an impatient exclamation, Claude touched his horse with the spur directly the swerve was recovered, and the horse responded freely, and went along even as he had been going before. As a slight relief to the feelings which that swerve had ruffled, he commenced cursing the cause of it aloud to Bella, as he thought; but he pulled up on finding Bella did not answer him, and riding back a few yards, espied her at the spot where she had paused, apparently for no better purpose than to look after the ill-timed human interruption to that deliciously soul-and-body-freshening breather they had been having.

"What is it?" Claude asked affably, riding back.

"I'm sure it's Rock!" she replied.

"Where?" he asked, less affably. He remembered that she had given Rock to Stanley Villars, and he did not care to see her betray the smallest further interest in him. It was ungenerous, considering all things; but, on the other hand, he must be forgiven for not considering "all things," since he was ignorant of many of them.

"There! following that girl—see!"

"That ass, do you mean, who rushed right across us just now?"

"Yes," she replied, agreeing, in her haste, to the uncomplimentary epithet he bestowed upon her sister-woman, without the expostulation that might have ensued under ordinary circumstances. Then she rode hastily up to the rails, Claude keeping by her side, until she was on a line with the woman who had crossed the Row and had now gained the greensward; and close by that woman a red setter was flaunting along.

"I'm sure it's Rock," Bella said, aloud, leaning forward over the near pommel as she spoke. At the sound of the name, a pretty, fair young face was turned towards her inquiringly, and the dog came forward in a series of airy curves, and leapt

up on to her habit, showing that he liked to meet her once more, by the shimmer of his tawny eyes, and the waving of his well-fringed tail.

"Rock, old dog! Poor boy! see how glad he is, Claude!"

"Yes, wonderfully! Will you come on now," Claude replied, coolly. It did not appear to be upon the cards that Rock should come into his own possession, and he had no morbid feeling in favour of another man's dog, more especially since that dog had become that other man's under circumstances that were interesting to himself, but not agreeable to look back upon.

"Yes; wait a minute, though. I wonder how he came here?" she continued, in a lower voice, to her husband. "You know I gave him to Stanley—do you think he is stolen?"

Claude felt uncomfortable. Instinctively he perceived that the young woman with the pretty, fair face was not a thief. Let her be what she would, there was not that amount of diabolical iniquity in her which is essential to the professed dog-stealer.

"No, come along—nonsense!" Major Walsingham replied, riding on slowly, and wishing that

his wife would not make a "spectacle of herself in this way."

"But, Claude!" she expostulated, riding after him, and still encouraging Rock to follow with her hand—"But, Claude! do stop! He's such a dog, to be about with anybody. I'm sure Stanley would have taken better care of him, because he's valuable, you see. I will ask her how she came by him."

The owner of the pretty, fair face was sauntering along just inside the railings all this time, watching Claude and his wife attentively. The baby-faced beauty had taken very kindly to the big, tawny, loving dog; but she had done so in unconsciousness. Stanley had never told her how Rock became his, nor indeed had she ever cared to inquire as to Rock's antecedents. But now that a beautiful woman caressed the dog as an old familiar friend, and alluded to Stanley as though he had been even as the dog (an old familiar friend, namely), Rock's antecedents became of interest to her instantaneously, and her memory went back jealously to every glance, every word, every touch of affection he had ever bestowed in her sight and hearing on the red setter, Rock.

"Ask her nothing of the kind. Come along, Bella!" Claude exclaimed, impatiently. "What the devil's the difference to you whether the dog is stolen or not?"

But, in such matters, Bella could still be wilful when an opportunity for being so arose. It might be a little thing to Claude that there should be doubt and uncertainty as to whom Rock belonged to now; but it was not a little thing to her. She had been very fond of the dog, and the dog had been very fond of her, while their union lasted. She had been welcomed boisterously by him a thousand times in a way that showed her that she had been missed. He had been her own—he had been very much admired—he seemed so unfeignedly rejoiced to meet her again to-day, though there was no bone in the case. Besides, it was not a little thing to her that Stanley should have so lightly regarded her present as either to have lost or given it away. Accordingly she was wilful, and would not attend to Claude's rather decided suggestion that she should "come along."

Still leaning forward to pat the dog, who kept jumping up at her horse's side every minute, Mrs. Claude Walsingham turned sharply to the

railings, and drew up at about three yards from the woman who was sauntering along over the sunny sward.

The owner of the lovely, simple face paused and looked straight into the bright, brilliant, beautiful one of her rival—looked into it with a child's admiration for what is beautiful, with a child's transient feeling of jealousy, dread, and distrust. Bella glanced at the girl a trifle superciliously. "Stanley's landlady's daughter, I should say," she thought. "Impertinence! to take Rock out." "I beg your pardon," she said, aloud, "but I used to know this dog. Can you tell me to whom he belongs now?" And the answer was—"The dog belongs to my husband, Mr. Stanley Villars."

Then Bella was silent, and rode on.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DOUBT.

It is not in the heart of man to triumph outwardly over a fallen, or say tottering, foe, in the "I told you so" strain. That form of consolation is one specially affected by the gentler sex, who lilt these little lays of love lachrymosely whenever occasion serves. But though it is not in the heart of man to triumph outwardly, he still has a certain feeling of sore satisfaction when an evil, which attention to his counsel would have obviated, comes, through disregard of that counsel, to pass.

Major Walsingham had counselled his wife to "come along;" had asked her not to mix herself up with possible dog-stealing and other matters in which she had no concern, merely out of a manly dislike to betraying active interest in any-

thing that was out of his own orbit. He had no intense desire to be fully acquainted with Rock's present—no loosely-packed, but still valuable to the owner, bundle of memories connected with Rock's past. The girl, so idly sauntering along, through the noontide heat of an August day, was too pretty, too marked, tawdry, and observation-compelling altogether, for intercourse between her and his well-known Bella to be desirable in that place. Therefore, he had not alone wished, but had told his wife to pass on and be silent. And his wife had developed her old infirmity, wilfulness, and had pulled up effusively to speak to a girl whom she didn't know, about a dog for whom she ought no longer to have cared.

The punishment came quickly after the offence. Delicacy of feeling restrained him from looking direct at her, to see how deep the lash, contained in that single sentence the baby-faced beauty had spoken, cut. But that it had cut, and cut deeply too, he knew, through the agency of that animal magnetism which makes us writhe, and wince, and shiver, when the one we love is doing these things in our immediate atmosphere. For two minutes and a half he felt sympathetically

tender towards Bella; she had "got it," he knew, from a quarter whence she had so little anticipated it. Then he reflected that Bella had no right to care about Stanley Villars, having allied himself to what he (Claude) denominated "a queer lot;" and when he thus reflected, the delicacy which had caused him to refrain from looking at the slightly wounded, deserted him, and he glanced askance at his wife, and grew red and resentful.

Bella's feelings, meanwhile, were mixed; but the worst ingredients in that mixture were of a nobler sort than Claude imagined them to be. Whenever she had thought about Stanley at all (and she had, woman-like, thought about him several times since she had learnt, through the medium of his writings, that he had it in him to rise and distinguish himself), she had been conscious of a half-hope that the wound she had made would be healed in time. She had thought, in a sketchy, undefined way, that Stanley would get over her defalcation and be happy, after an exalted pattern, with an exalted wife—a superior woman, with a lofty forehead and a bone in her nose. A woman whom she (Bella) could respect

Bella would have liked to think of any alliance he formed. Her heart swelled and her colour rose. To have been cast out from Stanley's heart —from the heart of *any one* who had once loved her—by such an one as this!

They had kept the silence so long after that sentence the baby-faced beauty had uttered, that there was something awkward in breaking it. At length, when Bella did so, she was the first to speak naturally. Claude was conscious of feeling suspicious—she was unconscious of anything of the kind.

"Do you think she told the truth, Claude?" she asked abruptly, as their horses went up that slight elevation in the Row at a steady gallop, that admitted of no excuse for further silence, as the stirring trot of a few minutes before had done. "Do you think she told the truth, Claude?"

"Probably!"

"I don't think it probable," Mrs. Walsingham exclaimed determinately. She thought it quite the reverse of probable, in fact; and it seemed to her a mean estimate for Claude to have formed of Stanley Villars.

"It's not worth arguing about. Slacken your

curb, Bella; if you go on pulling at him in that way, he'll serve you a trick some fine day, and be off when you don't expect it."

"But it is worth arguing about, Claude. I'm interested in Stanley's well-being still, whatever you may be; and I do think, after all, that you might feel a little for him."

"My feeling for him wouldn't do any good; he has chosen his own path; for God's sake let him follow it in peace."

"How can I—how can you *expect* me to be so indifferent about an old friend?" she asked, almost piteously.

"I thought the old flame of friendship had died out. If it hasn't, and its ashes are liable to burst out into a blaze at any moment, I can only say that it will be unpleasant for me."

She shook her head vehemently, and drew Devilskin nearer to his side.

"Not for you, Claude—don't say that; whatever you may be, you're not ungenerous."

He made no reply. To him it seemed that she was begging the question. He did not recognise the truth, which was, that the qualities she most adored, she strove to deck her husband in.

"You're not that," she repeated; "besides, if I may not speak to you about a thing, to whom may I speak?"

"Couldn't you hold your tongue about it?" he suggested, quietly. In his heart he was sorry that things should be going so utterly wrong as they appeared to be going with Stanley Villars. But he remembered the past, and it went against his taste—to the dictates of which he paid more attention than to those of his heart—that his wife should mix herself up, identify herself in any way, with Stanley's dearer interests. Added to this feeling, which he would have experienced under any circumstances, there was the natural shrinking a man would be sure to feel against aught dubious coming in contact with one dear and precious to him. Now Bella was very dear and precious to him, for all his occasional lack of judgment in his treatment of her. She was very dear and precious to him, and there was a very dubious air about the baby-faced beauty who was sauntering through the sunbeams.

Major Walsingham asked, "Couldn't you hold your tongue about it?" in a quiet, amiably superior, tolerant-to-your-weakness way, that it

is hard to listen to and maintain repose. He intended his remark to be taken as a definite and satisfactory conclusion to the subject by Bella. He meant it to stop further discussion, to wind up the matter gracefully, leaving her in the position of one whose erring judgment had been set straight, and who was silently grateful, as became one conscious of inferiority in experience and mind. But this was Bella's misfortune. She did not think about Claude's larger experience, and had she thought about it at all, she would have been in doubt as to his having the larger mind of the two. Had she felt that he did possess it, sorely as she might have disliked his snubbing her, she would have known through it all that he *was* to be obeyed, and so would have stood it better. As it was, she fretted under his assumption of power and superiority, even as her horse fretted under the curb, of which she was giving him more than a touch.

"No, I can't hold my tongue about it, Claude; and why should I? Her 'husband, Mr. Stanley Villars,' indeed! Couldn't we find out about him? It will be shocking if he has married in such a way! Shocking for Florry!"

He laughed. They were walking their horses now, and on across the grass their eyes would travel after the forms of the woman and the dog who had given rise to the discussion.

"You were not always so careful of Florry's feelings," he said.

"It was love for you made me careless then; come, sir!"

She turned her face to him as she said it, and the softened light in her eyes, the heightened colour on her cheeks, and, above all, that marvellous inflection of the voice which cannot be affected, did its rightful work.

"My dear girl, I know that," he replied; "show your love for me, dear, by not disturbing yourself and bothering me about what is done and can't be helped. Stanley has chosen his own path—it mayn't be a pleasant one, but it's one from which you can't turn him; and it isn't pleasant for me to hear you always going into rhapsodies about him; the day's gone by for your being his guardian angel."

She looked at him keenly, in the attempt to discover whether jealousy had a share in the feeling which prompted him to utter these words,

or not. He ought not to have been jealous of her—of her who had put the paltry feeling so entirely out of court about him. Her love for him was to the full as deep and true as his for her; and still, poison-fraught as was that letter she had received this morning, it had caused her no pang save the one grand one that any person could have deemed her weak and base enough to be influenced against her husband for one instant without sufficient cause. Whereas he was jealous now of her openly betraying that she still felt an interest in whether Stanley Villars sank or swam. He sat his horse like a centaur, and she had run the gauntlet of opposition for his dear sake; yet for all these things (and they were mighty links) she wished that he possessed more magnanimity.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A HARD CASE.

We have probably all heard that the merry, merry sunshine makes the heart so gay. It is an axiom that has been set to music, and harmony always imparts an appearance of truth to a statement. When the sentiment is trilled out by a songstress in satin under a glaring gaselier, it naturally strikes us as veracious. The heat of the sun in the open—anything, anywhere!—is sure to be regarded as enviable, even as gaiety provoking, when our heads are throbbing from artificial heat, strongly impregnated with patchouli.

But there are certain conditions of mind when the merry, merry sunshine stabs rather than soothes. When we are unappreciated, unsuccessful, uncared for. When the light of love has gleamed over us, and for some reason gleams

over us no longer. When the present is very dark and dull, and there seems to be nothing better in store. When all the hopes we ever had, lowly as they may have been, are fading fast. When the sense of our own inability is upon us crushingly, and we perceive the wounding truth that we are powerless of ourselves to help ourselves. When we feel left behind—not alone that, but trampled down by Fate, against whom we sulkily acknowledge that it is useless to struggle. When any or all of these things are, how terrible is the sunshine!

I suppose that we have all felt the terror of it—all of us, at least, who have temporal hopes, fears, and aspirations beyond the day. The brightness of it mocks, and the warmth of it burns us, and the glory of it irradiates each one but ourselves. We lose sight of the fact, that all these sensations are born of our own sense of defeat, perhaps—or of dyspepsia, or disappointment—therefore we do not look further back for causes, and discern that each one of these things is probably the offspring of incompetence, unworthiness, or—more likely still—of a weakness of will, a faltering of purpose, which prevented our

grasping and retaining firmly that which we desired to have. All things come to him who knows how to wait. All things are to be had by him who knows how to take.

> "He either fears his fate too much,
> Or his deserts are small,
> Who dares not put it to the touch,
> And win or lose it all."

That which has been done before may be done again; but there are certain phases of feeling when one loses sight of this fact, be one's determination to win eventually what it may. It is while in the state of bodily and mental languor that these phases produce, that the merry, merry sunshine becomes a trifle overpowering, and altogether a thing from which to shrink, as one that places your misery in a stronger light.

Now, poor Marian Villars had no particular will, and no design of life worth carrying out, even had the will to do so been hers. Had things been bright and well with her, had her home been happy, and her husband loving, and her wardrobe well furnished, she would have been as blithe as a bird even when a fog was hovering over the land. But none of these things were, nor were they

likely to be, as far as she could see, and her lights led her tolerably correctly. Therefore depression reigned in her soul, and the sunshine could not remove it. There was no gaiety in the heart of the poor pretty little saunterer through the sunbeams; the latter merely made the fact of her cloak being rusty and her dress shabby more patent to her.

She had come out this day for a walk, because the monotony of sitting at home, surrounded by ugliness, and stifled by the heat, had become almost unbearable. Stanley had asked her to "go out and get a little air," too, partly because he fancied that, like a bird, she was pining for the sunshine, and partly because she had a restless way of moving about in the room, causing his brain to reel.

His brain often reeled now, poor fellow! He told himself that it was the heat, and that when the winter came he should be all right again—more especially if he could take that "little rest" which amiable outsiders were always recommending to him in the fervent way people do recommend things which, if accepted, will cost them nothing. But in the meantime that reeling of the brain was a hard thing to bear.

Day by day the dread grew and strengthened within him that he was missing his chance—doing himself an injustice which he could never recall—burning his candle at both ends—wasting material which, if properly managed, might have made such a blaze as should have commanded observation. Day by day this dread grew and strengthened within him, until it attained such power, that to think of it was to paralyse his hand and numb his faculties, and drive him to seek oblivion in anything that came to hand—so hastening the end he feared.

He was getting irritably alive to sounds; not only to those which render day hideous in the streets, but to such as were partly the conjurations of his own brain. Noise and pressure, that was all he suffered from, he said, when any one had time to ask him, "What was the matter?" or "Whether he wasn't quite right?" Noise and pressure!—that was all.

Heads—editorial heads—had been shaken once or twice over the results of several hours of his hardest and most earnest labour, and he had been entreated sharply to write more carefully—more coherently—more as if he had something to

say and were capable of saying it. At last, the day before Bella and Rock met in the park, he was given to understand by the ruling power of a journal to whose staff he was attached, that he might go his ways without let or hindrance from them. "His writings had been ravings merely lately," he was told, "and the public wouldn't stand them."

Dreamily he accepted his dismissal—hazily he held that there was justice in the fiat which, pronounced, left him a more completely ruined man than he had been before. A little sooner or a little later, it was of small consequence. The end that was inevitable—that he had felt for some time to be inevitable—would come. He would fall and be forgotten, and the place where he fell would be unmarked! He went home with his head aching, as the head whose brain is overtasked will ache, and laid down, caring little whether or not he should ever rise up again.

There had been a little balm brought even to him in the evening. One of his own fraternity—a man who was living a from-hand-to-mouth existence by his pen, and living it in a light-hearted way, as yet—came and stirred him up,

sacrificing his own leisure to the by no means easy task, and not alone offering to do him good service, but doing it.

"It will be all right, old boy," he said to Stanley, in reference to that dismissal from the journal, which had left him in a worse plight than before. "It will be all right, old boy; they've put me on in your place for a few days."

Stanley looked at him vaguely. It mattered very little to him by whom he was superseded, since he held himself dismissed. He believed the man meant it kindly; but it was a queer form for kindness to take, the promotion being on the occasion of his (Stanley's) downfall.

"Only for a few days—only to keep it open for you," his colleague went on quickly. "I tell you what; it's all settled. I've arranged up there" ("up there" meant the office of the newspaper) "that I'll do your work till you're all right again, on the understanding that you'll do mine by-and-by when I knock up; do you see?"

Stanley felt very wooden about the head, but he contrived to nod, and say "Yes." Dimly he felt that "that young fellow Bligh" was being kind and generous to him—but only dimly.

"So that's all arranged then, and don't bother yourself about it any more," Bligh went on, as cheerily as he could, with the conviction oppressing him that "poor Villars would never do any fellow's work, or his own either." He had seen this thing creeping over other men before, but he had never been touched as now, for the men had been older than Stanley Villars, and their breaking down more gradual.

Very quietly, for a few hours, did Stanley resign himself to the repose which was thrust upon him. But the next day he grew restless, and declared that while he lived he must write. Then the stabbing and the reeling assailed him afresh, and he became agonisingly alive to the lightest sound in the room. Then it was that he begged Marian to go out for a walk. "Do go and leave me to myself, dear, till I have done this," he said, letting his pen stray down and then ramble over a slip; "and take that dog." Rock's regular breathing fell upon something in the top of his head as the incessant droppings of water might have done. When he was left, he drank brandy with laudanum in it till the present passed from him, and he found himself once more

in a broad old rose-embowered window, at the feet of Bella Vane.

He was haggard, wild-eyed, terrible to look upon, when his wife came home. "You have been working till your head aches again, Stanley," she said complainingly; "and so does mine—the sun's so hot to-day."

"Is it?" he asked absently.

"Is it! How can you say that? And oh! how *can* you bear to sit with it pouring down on your head in that way?" Then she turned to the table on which their dinner was already placed, and asked him, "Would he not come and have some?"

"No," he replied peevishly. "And I wish, Marian, you would teach that girl not to come in to this room; her elbows are enough to drive a man mad."

The girl's—the luckless maid-of-all-work's—elbows had always been a sore point with Stanley, as obviously they were sore points with their unhappily raw-boned possessor. They protruded themselves into everything—they courted observation, it appeared to him. Those elbows, and the way their owner had of charging at the stairs,

and then stumbling up or down them, as the case might be, had been colossal tributary streams to the ocean of his woe. He had been ready to beseech the girl, more than once, to pull her sleeves down and pick up her feet—to cultivate a higher action, in fact. But he had never done it, and now the sight and the hearing of her had become unendurable.

"She shall not come near you again, Stanley," the poor little wife half sobbed. "I'd send her away, dear, for I hate her, and her elbows, too—but I have no money left."

Instinctively he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out his purse. "Then pay her—get rid of her at once," he said, handing it to his wife. When she opened it her face fell a little, and a few tears came into her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked carelessly.

"It's empty, Stanley," she said, showing it to him.

"Then I have no money left either, and—and—" and then he burst into tears. As he wept on a change came over her; those tears of his touched that "right chord" in her which is, I believe, in every human being; and the thrill

it caused strung her up to do the work that was needed of her.

Her little idle dreams, her little venial vanities, her little childish discontents and repinings, vanished into thin air before this woe which she felt to be coming upon him—upon them both. She got up, fraught with that feeling of concealment, that beautiful deceit which God gives to women in such hours as these—got up and went over to him, seeming not to see his grief, not to be affected by it, smiling and being at once brighter and softer than she had ever been before.

For a time, a brief time, she soothed him strangely. He forgot his rapidly-increasing incapacity, he forgot that he had no money in his purse—no prospect in his profession—no friends in the world, as she sat on a low stool by the side of the couch on which he had stretched himself, and talked him into the dreamy state he had been in when first he opened his eyes upon her away in the little house by the Regent's Park.

"Marian, pet!" he said to her at last, "if it were not for what is before *you*, poor child, I couldn't be thankful enough for having married you."

Then the change that had come upon her when he shed those hot tears deepened, and she almost coo'd forth a low, murmuring answer that was like a song of gratitude and love.

But their case was very hard!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ENGAGED.

THERE was much sober satisfaction in Sir Gerald Villars' house. Florence had repaid all Lady Villars' care and anxiety. Florence had approved herself sweet and amenable to good advice, as Lady Villars had always trusted that she would do some day or other. Florence, in a word, was going to be married!

The bridegroom elect—a Mr. Chester—was as different as light from darkness, milk from brandy, from her first love, Claude Walsingham. He was a handsome young man, tall, with beautiful eyes, and a booby.

He had been a playmate of Lady Villars' in her childish days, a "great friend" of the immaculate Carrie's in her girlish unmarried ones. Since her marriage with Sir Gerald, Fred Chester had been given the freedom of her house. He came

in and out like a tame dog; he was so very inoffensive.

In addition to being inoffensive he was very kind-hearted. Florence had melted towards him because he looked depressed whenever Stanley was spoken of. She thought that it was warm feeling and tender interest for Stanley which caused this depression. In reality, it arose from a shadowy notion he had that he ought to say something, and an utter inability to think of anything to say on the subject. However, his looks touched Florence. *He* would never, she felt sure of that, keep a sister from a dearly-loved brother merely because that brother was under a cloud. *He* would help her to seek, and redeem (if redemption were necessary, which she doubted), and make Stanley happy and comfortable again! This conviction, and a certain feeling of being an incubus upon Carrie, of which she could not dispossess herself, swayed her. So when Fred Chester proposed to her she accepted him; Lady Villars having paved the way well for him, by telling her sister-in-law many times during the week previous to said proposal, that "her own sisters wanted to come and stay with her; but of course, though she wished

it very much, she couldn't have them *yet.*" And when Florence asked "Why not?" she had gone on to say, "When you are married I shall be able to, but Gerald wouldn't like the house be-sistered in that way."

Florence's heart went out more tenderly than ever to Stanley after it thus being made manifest that she was not too highly prized by the brother who was left. She began to feel in the way; she began to yearn for a stand-point of her own, from whence she should dare to stretch out her hand to Stanley. Here she was hampered by a dozen of those heavy chains which, though invisible to the casual visitor, too often eat into the flesh of the denizen on sufferance in a house. Gerald himself was kind and loving to her, but he did not "notice things," and he had a pious horror of Carrie being upset. Florence was a very soft and gentle woman. Had she been other, she could easily have brought her sister-in-law to understand that she gave fair payment by her presence for all favours received. But she was meek, and with the meek Lady Villars was apt to be merciless.

In reality, Lady Villars meant very kindly by her husband's sister. It seemed to her a sad and

a sorrowful thing that Florence should be suffered to pursue her path in solitude any longer; therefore any gentle spurrings that might urge her to quit said path, Lady Villars deemed herself perfectly justified in administering. It was for Florence's good she desired to see her with an active, living, present interest once more. When Florence had this she would leave off mutely raking over those ashes of the past—her shattered girlish devotion to her brother and to her brother's friend.

Moreover, Lady Villars was a woman on whom the claims of her own kindred pressed strongly. She had three sisters—three fair unwedded young beings, all with short noses and plump faces, and a marked disinclination to remain longer than was absolutely necessary in maiden meditation.

"It does seem unkind never to have the girls to stay with me," she would say to Florence; "I am sure they would be very much admired." On which poor Florence would feel guiltily that her unmarried presence in her own brother's house was held by her brother's wife to be detrimental to that lady's sisters.

There was kindness to a certain degree, and vast magnanimity, in Lady Villars ordaining that

Fred Chester should marry Florence. He was very tractable, and would have bowed himself at the feet of one of the short-faced beauties had the word of command been given. But it was not given, for Lady Villars had ideas on the subject of justice; and it appeared to her only fair that Florence, being the sister of the head of the house, should be given the first chance.

So Florence was given it, and Florence took it—not very gladly it must be admitted, but gratefully nevertheless. She had no ecstatic notions of beatitude resulting to herself from this marriage—such notions faded away from her for ever the day she heard Bella was to marry Claude—but she did hope great things from it for Stanley. For Fred Chester was wealthy and tractable, and he always, as I have said before, looked depressed when Stanley was spoken about.

It was now August, and they were to be married in the first week in September, then to go off and be happy on the Continent for a month, and then return in October to Fred Chester's place in Suffolk for the partridge shooting. It was a long time to be out of town. They would not be back till January. Florence grew brave as she

thought of it, and determined that she would ask Fred to take her to see Stanley. It would be best to obey him in future; the onus was off her of attending longer to Lady Villars' ideas.

But Lady Villars had been beforehand with her. "If Florence—dear girl! she has some sentimental notions—wants you to countenance her intercourse with Stanley, don't do it, Fred," she had said to her favourite vassal.

"No, I think she'd better not, because there's something wrong, by Jove! or he'd have turned up before now," Mr. Chester replied. On which Lady Villars nodded her fair little head and threw up her short nose, and said—

"Yes—low connection I believe; *misfortune* he has been to his family; I never did like him." Hearing which Fred Chester became depressed as usual when he had nothing further to say on a topic.

There were those extant who said that in days gone by Lady Villars had not disliked the younger brother. But she had always been a prudent girl; so, when he passed her by heedlessly, and the elder brother proposed, she took to seeing Stanley's faults, and cured herself, as was wise and well.

So when Florence asked her betrothed "if she mightn't go and see her brother now?" he cast her down into the depths by replying—

"Well, I think not yet, Flo; it will be better to wait—to wait a little, you know."

"But waiting only widens the distance between us. Just fancy what he'll feel if he hears from any one else that I am going to be married!" Florence said, pleadingly.

"It will be all right by-and-by," Fred said, in a down-hearted way, that belied his words. He could not bear the Stanley Villars question, for the simple reason that it was made a vexed one between his paragon Lady Villars, and his future bride. Had Carrie not put her veto upon it, he would have drifted away amiably into the most distasteful purlieus of our great metropolis in search of Stanley, had Florence ordered him to do so. As it was, straight sailing appeared impossible, and he was not gifted with the tacking mind.

"That's what Gerald and Carrie always say," Florence replied, mournfully. "All right by-and-by! They have tried to comfort me with that assurance for months!"

"They know best, you see," Fred Chester said, persuasively, looking at her with the clear, large, well-shaped, blue eyes, that were so perfect in form and deficient in expression—in the expression of that sympathy which she craved.

"I had so set my heart on seeing him now, and introducing you to him!" Florence said, trying to feel that warmth of interest in Fred which the latter part of his sentence implied.

"Oh, you'll see him by-and-by, Flo; but at present they must be careful, you know, and try to guard you from the least thing—that isn't quite —you know——"

"That's one of Carrie's sentiments," Florence cried, with a sudden flash of spirit. Patiently had she suffered herself to be dictated to by Carrie the dictatorial; but she could not suffer it patiently from the man who was to be her husband. "That's one of Carrie's sentiments," she said, almost fiercely. I believe that there is nothing sweeter, softer, more gentle, lovable, and harmonious in humanity, than one of these richly-coloured women, with golden brown hair, and luscious, melting, tawny eyes, like a setter's. But they can develop determination and spirit—

ay, and even angry resentment, when tried too far.

It was trying her too far now. Florence felt that it was, as she reflected on how her husband was to be made the instrument of her more complete separation from her brother. She could not be patient any longer. This was such a low form for rightful authority to take.

"Carrie is generally right," the lover said, somewhat abjectly. He cared very much for Florence, but he could not forget that Lady Villars had had a habit of ordering him about, and regulating his opinions for many years.

"But you can judge for yourself, Fred. Say now—do *you* think it right that I should fall off from my own darling brother because other friends fell off from him when his fortunes failed?" She asked it earnestly of him, laying her white hand on his arm as she spoke, and Fred Chester began to think that there was something in that view of the case, by Jove!—but for all that conviction, to wish that Lady Villars would come in and help him out of this difficulty!

"Yes; I can judge for myself," he said, with

a small, self-satisfied air, that was too little for his person, and too big for his mind. "I can judge for myself, Flo—any man can do that!"

"Any man should do it," she said, quickly. "Come, now—a bargain, Fred! In every other matter I will be guided entirely by you; but let my heart guide you in this; let me see my brother—not once or twice, but always—freely as a sister should see her brother—if you love me?"

The handsome young man with the beautiful eyes was embarrassed. Willingly, with all his heart and soul, would he have made this compact with "Flo" had not Carrie loomed before him—an avenging spirit, prone to be down upon any weakness committed by other than herself. He felt like a booby, and he looked like a booby, as he sat silent in his embarrassment. I think Florence would have done more wisely had she resolved upon steering her own bark.

"We'll talk about it another time, Flo," he pleaded presently. "You don't know, you see, and I can't tell you, you see; but Carrie seems to think that you had better let things rest for a time."

"And if I let them 'rest' now, will you do what I ask by-and-by?" she cried.

"Yes—oh, of course, dear!" and then he kissed Florence, and she shrank and shuddered as his lips touched her brow, and tried to make herself believe that she only did so because these kisses were such very new things.

Lady Villars got hold of him before he quitted the house after that interview with Florence. The gentle Carrie sent for him to her own little sitting-room, with the friendly design of making him feel what a delightful woman she was herself to have for a confidant, and of strengthening the purpose Florence might have undermined.

"You can sit there, Fred," she said, pointing to a low stool, a seat on which brought the occupier to a level with her feet; "you can sit there, Fred; and you shall have some tea with me, won't you?"

"No; I don't want the tea," he said, taking the seat she indicated, and bringing his beautiful eyes to bear upon her without the slightest meaning in them; "but I want to talk to you —you're such a sensible woman, and can tell a fellow what he ought to do. There's Flo got it

into her head that she ought to run after her brother Stanley, you know; and I don't care, you know, only——"

"Only, of course, you wouldn't—you *couldn't* allow her to do it. Oh, no! I quite see your objections," Lady Villars interrupted, sweetly.

"No: you—see—the fact is, I was thinking that *you* could put it to her, you know, if it had better not be, you see—at least, not now."

"Certainly not now, Fred; *your* wife compromise herself by mixing herself up with that young profligate's low intrigue!" Lady Villars' voice almost fizzed as she said "profligate;" it was so nice to apply this term to the man who had passed her over.

"That would be rather out of the way, by Jove! But I don't think she quite wanted that," Fred Chester remarked, meditatively.

"Oh, she doesn't know *what* she wants—dear girl!" Carrie said, with a plain snap, the epithet coming in as an ornamental after-thought. "Florence is very young, you know, and *we* must guard her, since she is incapable; in fact, it isn't to be desired that she should be alive to all the danger; but then, *we* know."

"To be sure *we* know!" Fred Chester replied, with a sapient air, that was refreshing to behold, if you were not going to be allied to him.

"If you took my advice," Lady Villars went on, in a sweet, small voice, "it may not be worth much—but it's well meant——"

She paused, and Fred took the opportunity of observing that he knew its value as well as any fellow; that he really would take it (and so would Florence) gladly.

"Then, if you really care for my poor opinion," Lady Villars resumed, sweetly, "I should say, keep our dear Florence away from Stanley's influence. It would be ridiculous to affect before you anything but a full knowledge of the brilliant—yes, *brilliant* future that awaits our darling." (Lady Villars grew as tenderly tearful at this point as regard for the hue of her short nose, which was apt to become inflamed, would permit). "It would also be *unfair* to you not to tell you that Florence's tendency to generosity amounts to weakness—positive weakness!—and to warn you that it may be played upon to your cost by those who have influence over her."

Fred Chester felt himself to be a mark for foul

designs, all of a mercenary order, on the spot. Of course, he was much too sharp to be taken in—he had that satisfactory self-assurance! But he would show Florence that he was the master, and that he was not disposed to lavish his red, red gold on unworthy objects!

He made this intention clear to Lady Villars, sitting at that sensible matron's feet, in the solitude of her little room, and looking at her with his beautiful eyes, in which was no dangerous meaning. When he had done that, Lady Villars sent him away; he was apt to become tedious after ten minutes, for all his good looks, if the truth be told.

If the truth be told about all things, too, it must be admitted that Florence had made a mistake—a second mistake—and a far larger one than that she had made about Claude Walsingham. It was only her heart that had been deceived in her intercourse with the man who had been in action and come out scatheless dozens of times, only to fall at last before Bella Vane! It was only her heart that had led her astray then. But now her head, her judgment, her knowledge of a by no means profound character, were all at

fault. The wish—the hope that he would go hand in hand with her about Stanley was father to the thought and belief that he would do so; and now that she had gone too far to recede—now that she had pledged herself, and made herself believe that she loved him—now that her sister-in-law had lavished sums at Marshall and Snelgrove's, and held countless consultations with Elise, and told everybody "what a delightful match it was—quite a marriage of affection"—now she discovered that, as Mrs. Chester, she would be as far from Stanley as she was at present! There would be a double guard over her to save her from the imaginary harm.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"THOSE ROSES!"

We left Stanley Villars, and the poor, pretty, helpless little girl whom he had married, to his own immediate cost and her ultimate sorrow, in a very evil case. Things had come to a very terrible pass with him on that August day when last we looked upon him. Now, a little later in the month, there was a ray of hope lighting up even his dim, dull, dark path.

It did not radiate from Florence. Had that once cherished sister realised how sadly he sickened for her whenever he did think of aught beyond the murky, miserable present, she would surely have burst the rotten chains they loaded her with for safety's sake, and have gone to him, and essayed to offer him such comfort as could still be shed upon that wasted, misused mind of

his. Had she known him as he was, lying there, day after day, in poverty, peevishness, and almost solitude, she would—she must have got herself together, for the leap that should carry her free of all the prejudices that held her from him.

Late on the night of that day when we looked upon them last, Stanley Villars made a solemn request of his wife. "Promise me one thing, pet," he said—he had grown strangely fond of and tender to her since he had began to fear what was coming upon her in her youth through him —"Promise me one thing, pet."

"Anything you ask me, Stanley," she said, with a little tremble.

"You'll never, let what will come, make any appeal to my family. God! I couldn't stand that!" He asked it almost fiercely, and she shook as she answered—

"Never!"

"They—I don't blame them, mind—but they don't want to have more to do with me; and I won't have them refuse *you* anything, poor child," he went on bitterly.

"Your sister Florence was very fond of you, wasn't she?" Marian asked, with a little, feverish,

feminine desire to hear something about the mighty family into which she had married—the family who utterly scouted her.

"*She* was fond of me, poor Florence! but that's past evidently."

"How?—why do you say so?"

"I have written to her, and had no answer," he said with a sob. "There, let's have done with the subject. It's the hardest thing of all that they should have turned that loving child from me utterly. Swear to me by your soul, Marian, that you'll make no appeal—take nothing from one of them—come what may!"

He was almost choked by the emotion with which he asked it. She hastened eagerly to give him the assurance he sought.

This conversation had taken place on the night of that day when Marian had sauntered out with Rock and seen Bella. When we see them again, a week or ten days later, things looked a little brighter.

Stanley's novel—the one he had been running through the magazine—had come out, and reviewers had been generous, as it decidedly is the wont of the majority to be when aught like merit

can be discerned. He was very weakly, and worn, and weary, in these days; but Bligh, the kindly, hard-working young fellow, who was stopping the gap, and keeping his place on the paper open for him, used to "look in" daily, if only for a minute or two, and bring him the notices, and tell him how things were going.

He was very weakly, and worn, and weary, in these days; so weak that the exertion of reading a favourable review, and the flash of hope the same would cause him, would be almost too much for him; so weak that he put a power of faith in the prospect others seemed to think was in store for him, for the non-committal assertion that his "work was full of great promise" was liberally indulged in. There was plenty in store for the future, he began to tell himself, and not absolute want in the present; for his salary came to him as usual from the daily journal for which he did *not* write, and Marian was always going out brightly to make purchases, and coming in brighter than she went out.

She was such a loving wife to him, such a patient, tender little nurse, that he might well feel it to be a cause for thankfulness that he had

married her. So the days drew on to the close of August, and that reeling of the brain went on more wildly than before.

One morning when she had got him up, and helped him down-stairs (the once strong erect man stooped now, and leant heavily on the slight arm and rounded shoulder of the lithe young girl whose slender form had shown off mantles and shawls so well), she knelt down by the side of his couch, and told him she had made a friend—such a nice one, and her friend was coming to see him to-day.

She told him this with dancing eyes and other signs of animation, and he tried so feebly now to respond, because of the deep pity he had for this girl who had none now for herself. Still, with a hazy recollection floating about in his mind of Miss Simpson, the model milliner, who was looming over him, he could not succeed in responding to Marian's communication with anything like the degree of warmth with which it was made.

"Your friend mustn't mind my keeping my face to the back of the sofa, Marian?—I can't be bored—I can't manage any talking till Bligh comes at night to tell me how things are going,

and hear whether I can get into harness again to-morrow."

Bligh never omitted this formula, though no one knew better than he that Stanley Villars would never get into harness again—that he was one more added to the long list of those who have broken down.

"Perhaps you'll care to talk when you see her," Marian said, softly. And when she said that, a gnawing desire to ask "Was it Florence?" seized the failing man.

But he would not ask it—partly because he would not put the idea of its being possible that she should come in Marian's head, and partly because he shrank from hearing an answer in the negative. He knew that he should wince and shrink did such answer smite him. He was so weak, so uncertain of himself, that he dared not risk a blow, though more than half prepared for it.

So he curbed the gnawing desire, and remained quiet with his face to the wall, with a cold dew of expectation on his brow, and a panting eagerness in his heart. Sternly as he had forbidden Florence to be sought, he was more than rejoiced that at last, though late, she was seeking him.

Marian busied herself about the room, trying to give it an air of brightness and cheerfulness, and failing by reason of there being nothing bright and cheerful in it. Dusting his books and papers, and fidgeting him wofully by the rustle she made, and the disarray she would be safe to introduce amongst his slips. Endeavouring to give the scanty curtains a graceful sweep and fall, which they could not achieve. Polishing up the surface of her little work-table till all the reels of cotton danced aloud within it, making Stanley's head stab, and causing him to curse this suddenly-developed domesticity. Flashing hither and thither in the room, and being very energetic and busy altogether.

By-and-by she went out of the room, and presently returned with a tall vase of roses—red and white roses—not overblown, and most delicately scented; autumnal roses, that had been born of the late summer sun, and had the fervour of it upon them.

Weak as he was, languid as he was, heart-sick as, heaven knows, he had good cause to be, he quickened at the sight and scent of them, and his old love for the beautiful sparkled up in the

dull eyes that so seldom saw cause for sparkling now. It was the first time Marian had ever brought him flowers; and from him, needing essentials as he so often did, a request for such frail luxuries would have come strangely.

But now that he had them—now, that she of her own free will had brought them to him—he let her see how he loved them, and she revelled in the sight. They were such dainty flowers!—deep crimson and creamy white. He would have them on her work-stand, close by his side, where his hand could rest caressingly on the vase that held them; where their perfume could reach him, bathing him in an atmosphere that brought back the vision of that rose-embowered window which had been Bella's shrine in the halcyon days of his adoration for her. There was something so graceful, refined, and elevating about those roses, that he felt more like a gentleman—more like his old self—than he had done for many months.

"I feel better already for the flowers," he said, calling her over to him, when she had done all she could do to the room, and was pausing to look at the effect of her labours; and finding the "all" very insufficient—"I feel better already for the

flowers. What good taste it was to get all roses, dear."

She blushed, and smiled, and looked pleased.

"Ain't they lovely and expensive?" she asked, simply.

"Expensive! are they?" with a sigh of disappointment. "Ah! I never thought of that; poor child, you shouldn't have got them for me!"

"They were given," she explained, opening her eyes like stars. "Here, Rock! get up," she called to the dog. "He shall have one in his collar, Stanley," she continued.

"Given, were they? by whom? No, I won't have one wasted on the dog! they must last me for so long."

He spoke peevishly, petulantly, as a sick child might have done. He did not like to hear that the rare flowers had been given to his wife. And yet he could not part with them—they were too sweet and dear.

"When they're dead you shall have some more. Do let me put one in Rock's collar!"

He took hold of her hand in his own almost transparent one.

"You must not accept presents, Marian, from ——" He stopped, and she asked, "Why not?"

"Don't bother about the dog. Who gave them to you?"

She put the rose she had taken out back into the vase, and replied—

"That's a secret! You'll know by-and-by, but it's a secret now!"

Then he looked at her small, pure face, and never doubted but that it was a "secret" which she might indulge herself in with perfect safety to them both. Perchance, even, the flowers that were so sweet to him were from Florence.

As the hours passed, Marian grew very watchful and uneasy, and he saw that she was getting anxious about her expected visitor. She kept on going to the window and looking out eagerly; and she made Rock stand up, with his large white paws on the sill, in order that he might sight the arrival at once, and give notice by one of his deep, rolling barks.

Presently the notice was given. There was a sound of wheels; then an angry bark from Rock, which was quickly changed into a joyous one, as he caught sight of some one coming up the steps. The red setter rushed round the room in intense excitement, his white feathered tail flaunting like a pennon; and some of the dog's excitement

communicated itself to the master. Poor Stanley Villars was too weak to rise, and too nervous to remain quiescent. He could only flutter, as an old woman or a young girl might have done.

Marian had rushed out to meet her guest; and he heard them speaking in the passage, but they spoke in whispers, and he could not, therefore, recognise the stranger's tone. "I shall die the happier for having seen Florry," he thought. Then a sob, that he could not check, sent the burning tears, that he would have given all he had not to shed, rushing from his eyes. Involuntarily, as the door opened, he clasped his hands over his face, in order that his sister should not see the change that he knew too well was upon him. There was a quick movement, as of rustling skirts, through the room, and a light hand was laid on his. He uncovered his eyes then, and looking up, saw a beautiful face, burning with emotion, and trembling with passionate helpless pity, bending over him, and a slight hand trying to repulse the rough caresses of the dog. And the face was not that of his sister Florence, but of her who had been Bella Vane.

CHAPTER XL.

MAKING A BOOK.

LEAVING Bella to gaze undisturbed with no very enviable feelings on the form of the man whose downfall had dated from the day he learnt that she was false as she was fair; leaving that man in a maze of bewilderment as to how she came near him now—how this miracle came to pass, that she, his old love, should be his wife's new friend; leaving that poor little wife panting, partly with hope and partly with fear, for the result of this combination which she had effected —I will go back a few steps, and strive to make clear to my readers the maze through which Mrs. Claude had come to the meeting.

A day or two after that encounter with Marian and Rock in the park, Major Walsingham had been summoned to "the Court." His father was

very ill, and he, the heir, was needed. Before he went he said to his wife—

"By the way, Lady Lexley has been ill, Bella: I wish you would call and inquire for her."

"I will, if I am going that way," Bella replied coldly. She could not conquer her dislike to Lady Lexley, and she felt annoyed with Claude for thrusting her into communion with that lady, to say nothing of feeling annoyed with herself for entertaining the dislike.

"Certainly don't go out of your way to do it," he replied carelessly; "that wouldn't be well, in fact; but there's no harm in being civil to her since every one else is." With which rather sketchy rule for her safe conduct, he left his wife and went down to "the Court."

Two days after his departure she received a letter from Claude, containing a request to which she had no inclination to accede, and which she had no reason for refusing. "My mother tells me that Grace Harper wants to go to town for a week or two; the aunt with whom she usually stays (old Lady Lexley) is in Wales; you had better invite her to be your guest. By doing so you'll oblige an old friend of my family's, and

please my mother." Having written thus much, he went off into another subject—his father's ill-health namely. But later in the epistle the Grace Harper topic came upon the board again. "I shall tell Ellen to arrange for you with Miss Grace, and one of them will drop you a line to-morrow, telling you what time you may expect her. Then he wound up with expressions of his unalterable affection for her; and Bella, in the pleasure of perusing these, forgot her slight annoyance at Miss Harper's expected advent.

"Besides, I rather like the girl, and of course Claude's free to ask whomsoever he pleases to the house. Only I had *such* a time of it with Mrs. Markham, that I would have preferred a longer respite from lady visitors. However, there's no help for it."

There was no help for it. The day after a kindly-worded letter from Grace arrived, thanking Bella for *her* "kind consideration in wishing to have her (Grace)," and utterly ignoring Claude's share in the arrangement. "Dear Claude! he has made it seem to be entirely my own idea. I suppose he really does want the people down there to like me very much," she said to herself, as she

laid the letter down; "but why didn't she go to Lady Lexley's, I wonder?"

Miss Harper, and her maid and her man, arrived in the course of the following day. She was far too precious a thing to have been entrusted to the tender mercies of the railway company without these adjuncts. She arrived, and her young hostess made her frankly welcome, and even asked after "her friend Mrs. Markham" with something like interest.

"For, though she's Claude's sister, I always feel that you're much more intimate with her than I am," Bella explained, on Grace making large eyes at the question.

"Don't you write to each other?" Grace asked.

"No, never."

"How odd! At least I suppose it's antipathy. Do you know," she said, with a well-affected effort, "I have the same feeling against my cousin's wife."

Bella blushed: so had she the same feeling, only she was half-ashamed of it.

"It all comes, in the case of Lady Lexley," Miss Harper went on, "of her having been professional. There are sure to be rumours, you know; but it's unchristian to regard them."

"Do you know anything against Lady Lexley?" Bella asked eagerly.

"Oh, *no!* and don't let *us* be the ones, dear Mrs. Walsingham, to give rise to scandal," Miss Harper said with emphasis.

"Give rise to it!"—all Bella's generous impulses were stirred within her—"now do you think I could be so base?"

"No, I do not," Miss Harper rejoined; "but still, dear, you must promise never to hint a word that I have said. I *don't* believe it (though I'm not fond of her); it would be cruel to believe it, to act as if we believed it."

"Believed what?" Bella was getting bewildered.

"Why, that she is not all that a woman ought to be. Oh, dear, it's so hard to do right! God knows what is in my heart!" Miss Harper went on, piously lowering her yellow eyelashes over her cheeks as she spoke.

"I don't wish not to think her that," Bella said remorsefully. She felt so sorry now that she had not been to inquire for Lady Lexley.

"I shall never forgive myself if you ever hint that I have spoken on the subject," Miss Grace exclaimed; "it was so wrong of me to speak. I

believe her to be as pure as I am myself. Promise me that you will never, by either word or manner, to any one, let a hint of this escape you."

Bella promised nervously and hurriedly. Why should *she* be supposed to be anxious to run down an innocent woman? She promised that she would not do so, rather more fervently than was perhaps necessary. There was nothing mean in the girl's nature; had there been, she would have distrusted this hedging on the part of Miss Harper—this late circumspection—this pious prudence.

Almost immediately Mrs. Claude Walsingham called to inquire for Lady Lexley. Lady Lexley was not at home. With almost royal celerity Lady Lexley returned the visit, and Bella begun to feel that there was something pleasant about the woman—something pleasant in the dramatic character of her beauty—something pleasant in her openly-expressed admiration for Bella herself.

Grace was more than friendly in her demeanour to her cousin's wife. She was loving and affectionate to a degree that made Bella feel herself to be but a cold sinner in comparison. She called

Lady Lexley "dear," and sat on a little stool at her feet. She offered to do all sorts of things for Lady Lexley, and then disappointed Lady Lexley when the time for fulfilment came, in the most engaging manner.

Lady Lexley knew something—as did the majority of people in their world—of Mrs. Claude's former engagement. She had heard it spoken of in a hundred ways, as broken engagements, to the cost of those who break them, are ever spoken about. In her own often-erring heart she did full justice to all that was good, all that was true, all that was undesigning, in Mrs. Claude Walsingham. She knew Bella to be thoughtless, careless, too quick to feel and to act. She also knew Bella to be honest in her impulses, no matter into what evil those impulses led her; and she believed Mrs. Claude to be endowed with that sort of generosity which risks its possessor very often, and revolts at all meanness. "If she knew what that man was suffering she wouldn't go on her way smiling," Lady Lexley said to herself one day, when she had heard from the indefatigable Simpson the story of "her (Simpson's) friend Mrs. Stanley Villars' sorrows."

"The man has cut his own throat, of course; but that child will feel that she put the knife in his way, and will bless any one who'll help her to heal the wound."

Fraught with this idea, she speedily made an opportunity of telling Mrs. Claude all she knew; and then Mrs. Claude confided to her in turn how she had "heard Stanley Villars had a wife, and how she had disbelieved it."

"But it's true for all that," Lady Lexley replied; "the girl he has married isn't a lady, but she's honest and pure; help to keep her so, Mrs. Walsingham, for they're in horrible distress."

"I will tell Claude the instant he comes home," Bella replied; "how he'll feel it, poor boy!" In the midst of her own grief for the evil that had come upon Stanley Villars, her greatest sorrow was for the grief of the man she loved. "How he'll feel it, poor boy!" she half sobbed.

"Yes, it's very hard to see one who has been swimming with us go to the bottom," Lady Lexley replied; "but you may as well see his wife, as you and Major Walsingham were such old friends of her husband's. Nearly every one gets spoken about in this world; but there's not

a breath against that poor child Mr. Villars married. It's pitiable," Lady Lexley continued, waxing warm, "to see her sauntering about in the park by herself, because she's weary of the streets, and needs air. See her, Mrs. Walsingham, and see her soon."

"When Claude comes home," Bella said.

"When will he come? The man is dying, I tell you. Write to your husband about it."

But from this Bella most unwisely shrank. "I can tell him everything in two minutes—how I heard of it, and all; but to write, it is different. Claude is so fastidious; I should like to see *her* soon, though; and to help them, if I could."

"I tell you how you can manage, then," Lady Lexley replied, eagerly; "come to luncheon with me. Ah! there's Grace. Well, bring her, and come to luncheon with me to-morrow; then we'll go to the shop where she used to be, and Miss Simpson can tell you her address; something must be done, and done quickly—the man is dying."

Bella blenched.

"But what can *I* do?"

"See them for yourself, and then let his family

know. Had *I* the right of old friendship which *you* have, wouldn't I do it, think you! It's hideous to think about, even to me, who only knew Mr. Villars by name and repute." She stopped, breathless with genuine horror at that fate which had befallen Stanley—a fate she, better than Bella, could realise.

"Then it shall be so. How could I ever have hesitated?" Bella said, with tears in her eyes. "It's all I can do to go and see him—them, I mean—and show him that my friendship is unaltered."

"Of course it's all you can do—till your husband comes back; but do it without delay, for heaven's sake!" Lady Lexley cried, energetically. "Come to me to-morrow, and I'll put you in the way of doing it."

On the morrow, shortly after Mrs. Claude had mooted the subject of going out to Lady Lexley's to her companion, Miss Harper was seized with a violent headache. "*Would* dear Mrs. Claude go without her, and give her best love and a thousand apologies for her non-appearance, to Adèle?" Mrs. Claude would, but still regretted very much that Grace should fail her.

"I don't like to leave you, as you are so ill, Grace," she said.

"Oh, my dear! for you not to go would be a dreadful slight to Lady Lexley. Poor thing! why should you wish to hurt her? Do go, and be kind to her; you see she lost her old friends by her marriage, and hasn't made many new ones since."

"Kind to her; it's no question of kindness or unkindness," Bella exclaimed. She began to fear that she must have a most uncharitable disposition, and that Miss Harper had detected the same, and was trying to guard her from its ill effects, and to re-mould it as became a Christian.

"Then, do be careful. Pray, be very careful," Miss Harper replied. And Bella, not feeling at all sure as to what she was to be careful of, went off with a confusion in her brain.

Went off, and partook of the aforesaid luncheon with Lady Lexley, and then ordered her carriage round, and asked for the address of the shop at which Mrs. Stanley Villars was to be "heard about."

"But, I'll go with you, if you'll allow me; we shall see *her* there," Lady Lexley said, fixing her

eyes on Mrs. Claude's. On which Mrs. Claude felt confused as to something, she knew not what, and replied, "Oh, certainly; most happy."

But she was not happy, and she taxed her mind to the utmost to supply herself with a valid reason for being otherwise. She had given her jealousy of Lady Lexley to the winds, and Lady Lexley had lately been showing a very womanly and generous desire to put her (Bella) in the way of doing good to one whom she had formerly injured. Lady Lexley had done this, too, in a way at which no one could have taken offence. She had put it on the score of their old friendship for Stanley, not of Bella's old fondness for and falseness to him. Lady Lexley had approved herself a generous-natured, kind-hearted, quick-feeling woman in the business. Yet, for all that, Bella felt that she would rather be elsewhere, when she found herself driving along the "ladies' mile," in an open carriage, with Lady Lexley.

"Why can't we go straight across the park, and out at the Marble Arch?" Mrs. Claude asked. She had not heard the order that had been given to her own footman to pass on to the coachman. She had taken it for granted that Lady Lexley

would have given the address of the shop, and that they should have driven there at once.

Lady Lexley blushed. She was not a malicious woman. She did not desire to harm any other woman. But she had no intimate female acquaintances, and in the course of transacting the amiable business which was to result in good for the Villarses, it occurred to her that she might as well achieve good for herself, and be "seen" a good deal with young Mrs. Walsingham. She had no desire to be the cause of a breath of ill-odour passing over Mrs. Claude's bright head; but she could not refrain from risking giving rise to this breath, in the hope that it might temper the breeze that was abroad about herself—a breeze that was bitingly sharp sometimes, and not to be lulled even by her present, prudent, open course. Lady Lexley would have been very sorry to overshade Mrs. Claude Walsingham; she would not do so wittingly. But she was far from certain that she should overshade her, and she was very certain that being seen with Mrs. Claude could not be other than a reassuring thing in the eyes of all men who beheld the sight, about herself. In fact, she did not wish to work evil to her

neighbour; she only wished, and wished strongly too, that her neighbour might work good for her. It was very natural. None can blame the womanly yearning for good, pure, womanly society. It is a thing to be desired—a thing to be striven for—a thing to be attained at any price Lady Lexley felt, especially in the open.

So now, when Mrs. Claude Walsingham asked rather confusedly why they could not drive straight across the park, and out by the Marble Arch, Lady Lexley answered that "it was too soon to go to the shop yet awhile," "That Miss Simpson told me," she added, "that Mrs. Stanley Villars was coming this afternoon, but it would be too soon to think of seeing her yet. If you want to go anywhere else, we can go, of course; but it's pleasant here, isn't it?"

"Very pleasant," Bella replied, and there came a blush upon her cheek as she spoke. The air was very soft and balmy; but men gave not "impertinent," but long looks into the carriage as they passed, and Bella began to wish that Lady Lexley had elected to use her own carriage for her morning's drive.

"Very pleasant! By-the-bye, I must go into

Regent Street. Stay! I'll put you down at the corner, and you can sit there and talk to people till I come back."

Lady Lexley made no reply for a moment or two. She was well inclined towards Mrs. Claude Walsingham; at the cost of pain to herself, she would have shrank from doing Mrs. Claude Walsingham harm. But here was no tangible harm to be done she thought; on the contrary, here was a very tangible good to herself. She did not wish to injure Bella; but she did desire that Bella should serve her.

"I don't see any people to whom I care to talk. No, I'll go with you to Regent Street, if you'll allow me," she said at last, looking Bella straight in the face as she spoke. Then Bella blushed again under her gaze, and said—

"Oh, certainly! I only thought—" and then broke down in her explanation, and condemned herself in her own heart for having suffered Miss Harper's undefined shadowings to cloud over Lady Lexley in her (Bella's) eyes.

The park had been bad enough, but Regent Street was worse. It was full for the time of year; full of people who knew her and her companion.

There were two or three blocks. Everybody was shopping this day; and their progress along the street, till they came to the repository for carved oak, at which Mrs. Walsingham was going to alight, was slow, mercilessly slow. Mrs. Claude Walsingham grew more and more flushed, and her manner more and more constrained, as they moved along at a foot-pace. And she was conscious of these things, and sorry for them, believing as she did, in her innermost heart, that there was uncharitableness and narrow-mindedness in her being even inwardly influenced by an idle word, idly spoken.

For Grace's manner of speaking had been idle, when looked upon in cold blood. True, she had seemed to strive to render it impressive at the time, by calling upon God to witness that she meant well, and was earnestly set upon doing right. But then Bella reflected that some people are very apt to do this on slight grounds, and she argued that had Miss Harper believed that at which she had guardedly hinted in apparent agony of spirit, that she would either have said less or more; and that she would have refrained from being effusively affectionate as she had been since to Lady Lexley.

"At any rate, if it gives her any pleasure to be with me, I don't see that I need grudge her that pleasure," Mrs. Claude Walsingham thought, heaving a sigh, and trying to get rid of a portion of the weight that was upon her. "How wicked I am to think evil on the strength of the actual *nothing*—the mere whisper—Grace said." Then she spoke out quite freely and joyously to Lady Lexley, spoke in a more intimate tone than she usually assumed towards more intimate friends, out of the fulness of that foolish generosity on which Miss Harper had counted when she played the card of the impalpable suspicion,

She was so foolish, this poor Bella. She had always been so addicted to going from one extreme to the other without due consideration; so apt to forget what was not immediately before her; so awfully ready to please herself and others at the moment, without counting the cost. Granted that she was all this, still she had such rare redeeming qualities. She was so ready always to repent and make amends; so incapable of seeing the bad side of things at the first; so very sorry to see them ever, in fact.

I do not mean to imply that she was slow to wrath, or meekly resigned when she fancied she

had been injured or deceived. On the contrary, she was very quick to feel slight or injury, and to flame up about either. But till she did so feel, she did not invest her time in looking about for weak places in people's characters, motives, or assertions. She had a habit of just letting them go on. It might have been amiability on her part, or it might have been mere idleness; at all events, whatever it was, it saved her from being a mischief-maker or a busy-body. It also saved her from the misery many more loudly professing Christians declare that they endure—the misery, namely, of too clearly discerning other people's faults and follies.

My heroine was far from perfect though it must be confessed; this day, for example, she had come out fraught with the determination of doing all that might be done for poor Stanley Villars and his wife, without an instant's unnecessary delay. Yet now, not a couple of hours after that determination had been in full bloom, it faded away, leaving her blithely regardless of the old friend's sad strait, as soon as she found herself in the midst of the carved oak. Her face flushed with a widely different glow to that which had been upon it as she drove along Regent Street,

and her eyes sparkled with a natural, but, perhaps, less praiseworthy excitement, than the one which had blazed in them when she had first listened to the tale of the trials of the baby-faced beauty who had been with Rock in the park.

Mrs. Claude Walsingham had come out with her purse well filled; and the contents had all been devoted, in her mind, to the holy purpose of making things pleasanter for Stanley and his wife. She knew well that he would rather die than suffer her to relieve his need. But from his wife—from the girl who was beautiful, but who was not a lady—no such delicacy of feeling was to be expected; at any rate, Bella did not expect it. Mrs. Stanley Villars should be drilled into silence for her own good, as to favours received—that, of course; equally, of course, would it be that she should receive them.

Now, however, that she found herself amongst things that were very dear to her taste, the latter came to the fore, and would be obeyed. Its government over Bella was an absolute monarchy; it always would give the law. So now she forgot what was not immediately before her, as was her wont, and the purse began to empty itself with fatal rapidity.

"I'm going to fit up a study for myself," she explained to Lady Lexley, when Lady Lexley commenced a series of impatient movements, all tending towards the door. "Oh dear! *how* I wish I could get a Robinson Crusoe writing-table, like that lovely sideboard that was in the '62 Exhibition! Do you remember it?"

Lady Lexley nodded. She did not remember anything about it; but it was easier to nod than to listen to a description of it.

"If you furnished your own design—any design—madam, we could carry it out for you *as* cheaply as any house in the trade," the man who was waiting on her here ventured to suggest.

"Ah! but I like to get what I see, you see," Mrs. Claude replied; "it might be all very well in my imagination, and a dead failure when carved; but a writing-table, like that Robinson Crusoe sideboard," she went on lingeringly, "would be charming."

The shopman, with the fell rapidity of his tribe, had his order-book out at once. "You will allow us to make a memorandum of it for you, madam?"

Bella shook her head despondingly. Their house was very fully and completely furnished,

she knew. The writing-table that had been appropriated to her own special use was of oak, well carved; *but* it was not a "Robinson Crusoe" writing-table, and for this she pined.

"I think we had better be going on, or we shall miss her to-day?" Lady Lexley whispered; "that is, if you are ready?"

"Oh! I'm ready—to be sure I'm ready! Just wait one moment, though—*those* candlesticks; did you ever see anything so exquisite?"

Lady Lexley affirmed that she never had seen "anything so exquisite; but would Mrs. Claude come now?"

"In one moment. I'll have those candlesticks. No I won't—I'll have the taller ones with the gnomes' heads peeping out through the flowers. And just let me see that inkstand. Oh, *charming!* Of course I must have that; wood sprites, and such wonderful leaves; it might be Gibbons' carving, mightn't it?"

Again Lady Lexley nodded. She had never heard of the individual referred to; but it occurred to her that if his carving was so superior, that Mrs. Claude might as well have gone to him direct, instead of purchasing what,

after all, was to his work as "cowslip unto oxlip is."

"I have a piece of furniture that will please madam," the man here remarked, with that subtle air of seeming to detect an artistically appreciative power in the purchaser, which sellers acquire by sharp practice. "A table, a square table, carved by Gibbons himself; it is very old."

"Wouldn't you rather have Gibbons do you a new one?" Lady Lexley asked aloud.

"We mean the eighteenth century Gibbons," Bella replied quietly. "There is such a lot of his charming works in Holland House. I wonder whether that is owed to the Countess of Warwick's taste or to Addison's?"

"This table I was speaking of belonged to Addison," the man struck in gravely. He had been casting about in his own mind for a fitting person on whom to fix the former ownership of this excellent article. Addison was as good for the purpose as any other man; therefore without hesitation he asserted that it had belonged to Addison, and so made Mrs. Claude Walsingham happy.

Her happiness was so patent to him, however, that he could but charge her a few pounds extra

for it—a proceeding which made no manner of difference to her, since she was unconscious of it. He smiled in gentle pity for her inexperience when he was bowing her into her carriage. But I, for one, think that pity misplaced. It is so nice to think that you have in your possession a table on which some of those wonderful *Tatler* and *Spectator* papers might have been written.

"Perhaps he did some of his 'Sir Roger de Coverley' at it!" Bella cried in a burst of enthusiasm when they were driving off.

"Who? Gibbons?" Lady Lexley replied absently. "I do *hope* we shan't miss her."

Which remark brought Bella's mind back from thoughts of that golden age—that time when Addison had lived and loved, and drank and written—to these degenerate modern days, when one gifted even as she believed Stanley Villars to be, could not live by his pen. She thought about these things sadly till they came to the shop where they were to see the girl who was asserted to be Stanley Villars' wife. My judgment may be faulty on the subject, but I confess to a feeling of preference for Bella, the woman who never doubted that assertion, though appearances might

be said to be against its truth, over the always-correct-in-conduct Lady Villars, whose Christian horror of evil-doing led her to detect it frequently before it was.

The poor little milliner, who had deemed it such a golden thing that she should marry a gentleman, was, as has been seen, in the habit of drifting back here to the society that was most congenial to her. She was rather at a premium in the show-room. She served as a subject for conversation amongst the "young ladies" in their hours of idleness. She could be let off as a successful fact—a genuine case of "risen from the ranks"—at the heads of languid lady customers, who were willing to linger over garments of divers shapes in wearying uncertainty. When expatiating on the "elegance" and "perfect style" of an opera-cloak, for example, the adroit Miss Simpson would tell in touching tones how sure said opera-cloak would have been to win the hearts of all beholders, had it but been seen over the shoulders of the late Miss Wallis, promoted. "This grew," till half the habitual customers of the place knew that, in some way or other, "the man Bella Vane had jilted had made a mess of it."

CHAPTER XLI.

A PRACTICAL CHRISTIAN.

It need not be told how, even at this their first meeting, the kindly lady who was "the cause," she felt, in a measure, of the sorrow that had come upon the girl, and the gentle, unpretending girl on whom the sorrow had fallen, understood one another, and came together as it were. There was something inexpressibly winning to Marian, who had never met with it before, in the rich, fearless warmth of Mrs. Walsingham's manner towards her. Bella turned to her at once when she came into the room, and found her there already installed, and, it must be confessed, gratingly familiar with her not too refined former companions. Turned to her at once—with no crushing condescension—with no mock "I am as thou art" demeanour—with no false superiority—

no degrading to one as to the other patronage—but with a great big hearty kindness, that proved she took the girl at once for what she stated herself to be, and looked. Turned to her as Bella would have turned to a duchess in distress—in a way that made Lady Lexley's eyes dilate with womanly sympathy, as belladonna had never caused them to do.

Their interview was not very long. When a few facts had been stated by the young wife, and listened to by Bella, they both found that they had little left to say. "I should like to come and see you, and him; we are such old friends," Mrs. Walsingham said with a little gasp, when Marian said she "must go now, or Stanley would be cross." On the statement of which desire Marian shook her head dubiously, and replied that she "was sure Stanley wouldn't bear to see any of his old friends," and let her lip quiver as she said it, and suffered a round, quickly-dried tear to fall.

"But I must see you both," Bella urged, "now we have met again, and he is ill."

"He has made me promise never to go near any of his family, or let them come near him,"

Marian said sorrowfully. And at that even kind-hearted Lady Lexley shook her head, and said to herself, "That looks bad."

But Bella was above suspicion as regarded Stanley Villars. It was all very well, or rather it was perhaps natural, that others should distrust him, and think that, because his first guard had been broken down, that evil should have entered in to the once well-defenced citadel, and have its own way entirely. It was perhaps natural that others should think this. But it would have been unnatural for her to think it, knowing the man as she did. The wrong he had wrought, whatever it might be, that had made him desire to cut himself off from his family, had not been a wrong to this innocent, fond, trusting girl.

"At any rate let me come and see him," Mrs. Walsingham urged. "As to his own family, between him and them I can't interfere, of course; but my husband was like his brother; why should he wish to cut us?"

"I never heard him name *you*," Marian said wonderingly.

Bella blushed. "How wrong of him," she said quickly; "he should have brought us

together, and made us friends. Are you fond of Rock?"

The brief pang that had been Marian's portion that day in the park, when Rock had leapt with a dog's enthusiasm about his old mistress, assailed her (Marian) again now.

"Did *you* give him to Stanley?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes, I gave him Rock; and now Rock has rewarded me by first making you known to me," Bella replied heartily. She understood perfectly well the nature of that pang which caused the baby-faced beauty to speak in a lower voice.

The interview ended satisfactorily. Marian was persuaded to give up her address. She was also induced to "try and think" whether there was anything Stanley might possibly like. But she shook her head in resolute refusal to "think" even that he might possibly care for anything save some flowers. On being put to the test, she showed herself in fact to be far from deficient in that special phase of delicacy which Mrs. Walsingham had felt sure would not be a conspicuous attribute in one "of her class."

So the roses were procured from the sacred

recesses of a damp drawer in a shop in Covent Garden market. Lovely roses—not cut off, and wired-up, and gummed, and otherwise manufactured—but fresh, fair, natural flowers, with long stalks and lots of leaves, and fragrance unimpaired. Lovely roses! that brought back the memory of bygone summer-days to Bella, even as they brought them back the following morning to poor, sick, suffering Stanley.

Before they parted, Marian acceded to Mrs. Walsingham's proposition of calling to see Stanley on the following day; and, as is the habit of women, she had no sooner acceded to it, than she began to entertain it enthusiastically, pressing Bella to "make it early," with a half-shy familiarity, that Bella would have watched with a feeling of semi-amusement in any woman save Stanley's wife.

When they were driving back to Eaton Square, in order that Lady Lexley might be deposited before Mrs. Walsingham proceeded home, the evil spirit of over-caution seized the usually unguarded Circe.

"If I were you, as those poor people want to keep close for reasons best known to themselves,

my dear, I wouldn't say a word of the matter to Grace Harper; she has a way of telling things that makes them change colour."

Bella winced. It is always unpleasant when two people take it into their well-meaning heads to put you—the luckless third—on guard against each other.

"Well, I won't, till Claude thinks I may."

"Oh, of course, you'll do as you please in the matter; I have no motive for concealment," Lady Lexley replied, carelessly; "but I have seen a good deal of Miss Grace, you know, and, as I said before, she has a way of telling things that makes them change colour."

"Do you mean that she tells stories?" Bella asked, quickly.

"That's such an angular way of putting it. No; you'll never catch her out in a story, if you lie in wait for her till the day of judgment; she really does stick to the letter—excuse the idiom."

"Then how does she change the colour of things?" Bella inquired.

"Mother of God! how should I know?" Lady Lexley cried, almost passionately? "she does it, she does it—but how? What does it matter

though?" she continued, with a sudden change of manner.

"Only that some time or other harm may come of her peculiar—talent," Bella said, hesitatingly.

"Harm come of it!" Lady Lexley replied, laughing. Then the slumbering southern fire in her blood blazed up, and she added, "If harm came through it to *me*, I would tear her thick white skin off her face in strips, and have her hissed at the church door; that would sting her more than anything!" she continued, with a bright laugh, that made Bella's blood curdle, coming as it did immediately after the enunciation of such sanguinary sentiments.

Miss Harper's head was quite well when Mrs. Walsingham got home. Grace looked so cool, so good, and unemotional, as she raised her head to greet her hostess, that Bella felt her to be almost a relief, after turbulent Lady Lexley.

"I am sorry you could not go——" "with me," Bella was going to say, but she paused on the brink of the polite perfidy, and substituted "out for a drive."

"Oh, thank you; but I have been very well amused, dear Mrs. Walsingham," Grace replied,

indicating, as she spoke, the book she held in her hand as the source of her amusement.

"What is it?" Mrs. Walsingham asked. Then she looked again, and added, "Oh! Stanley Villars' novel!"

Miss Harper nodded. "Perhaps the worst thing about such works," she said in a sort of humble and contrite tone, "is that they absorb you against your convictions."

"You mean they amuse you, I suppose, whether you want to go on reading just at the time or not; that's my idea of what a novel should do," Bella replied, hardily.

Grace shook her head. "The novelist has so much in his power, if he only uses his gifts aright," she said, in the same tone as before.

"If he gets good prices, he has as much and no more in his power than other men with money," Bella replied, wilfully misunderstanding the fair critic, and trusting fondly that by so doing, she should avert the bolt of censure which she perceived was in readiness to be let fly at her.

"I can only say that I am glad the man who wrote *that* book is no friend of mine," Grace went on, with the faintest tinge of colour coming upon

her cheeks. That is one of the great advantages fair women have over duskier ones; they can get into a terrible passion without at the same time getting red in the face.

"I dare say you wouldn't care for literary society." Bella spoke coolly; but her heart was hot within her. It was hard to hear the man who had nearly burst his brain over the work that was daily bread to him—who had broken down as Stanley Villars had!—it was hard to hear him thus lightly judged by a mediocre woman with yellow eyelashes.

But she would not have put in this plea—that he had striven while strength was his to strive, and failed in agony—for all the goods the gods had ever given her. She would not have done it. She could not have done it. There are some people whom even their friends dare not attempt to excuse.

The battle is not always to the strong, nor is the race invariably to the swift. Miss Harper was mentally a far weaker woman than the one with whom she was combating. That she was "slow," no man could be found to deny. But for all these things she was likely to come in winner

in this contest upon which she had entered. For her blood ran coldly in her veins about all things that did not immediately concern herself, and when the circulation is thus well-regulated, success in all matters of feeling is inevitable.

"I can only say," Miss Harper repeated, dogmatically, "that I am very glad that the man who wrote that book is no friend of mine."

Mrs. Claude Walsingham heaved, but held her peace.

"It must be very painful to you, dear Mrs. Claude, to peruse such sentiments as I find here," Grace persisted, tapping the book with her soft, white finger as she spoke. It was a peculiarity of those fingers of hers, that, soft, white, and well rounded as they were, they yet had a lazy, cruel look. Mrs. Claude Walsingham was fascinated into glancing wistfully at them, as though they were things that must be watched and warded off, as she answered—

"The author being a friend of mine, maybe I have lost judgment about his work."

"Then the book is likely to be more pernicious to you than to me," Grace replied, calmly; "you ought not to read it."

"I am greatly obliged to you for the caution; but on such a point you must allow me to judge for myself," Bella answered, speaking with that fatal coolness which is the sure precursor of a storm.

Grace Harper smiled inwardly. Inwardly, too, she told herself that she was really only doing her duty in striving to irritate Bella, and depreciate the work of the man whose views differed from her own. What those views were is very immaterial to my story. They are simply alluded to in order that Bella's motive for acting as she is going to act may be made manifest.

"I should be false to myself, and to everything that I have ever been taught," Miss Harper said in her stolid way, "if I did not tell you what I think about Mr. Stanley Villars' ideas."

"You have told me." (Then the servant came in, and announced dinner.) "Very well, Hill. Now, Grace, we must escort ourselves in to the dining-room. Oh, dear!" she continued, as they were coming down stairs, "how I wish my husband were back!"

Miss Harper did not echo the wish. She only smiled, and thought "I hope he won't be back yet. What a nuisance that 'dinner' should have

come in the way just then! She was ready to say anything."

Later in the evening the subject was renewed in this way. Mrs. Claude rang the bell, and ordered Hill, when he came, to "take back the two volumes that are lying on that table to Mudie's, to-morrow morning, and ask for the third."

"Is it 'Never a Chance,' that you're sending back?" Miss Harper asked, mentioning the title of that work of poor Stanley's, which was indeed but a reflex of his life.

"Yes," Bella replied, briefly.

"Oh, I'm sorry!—I haven't done with it."

"Put it down, Hill—don't take it!" his mistress exclaimed, sharply, to the hesitating servant. As soon as he was out of the room, she continued, "I beg your pardon—but I could not imagine, after what you said, that you were going on with the book; otherwise, of course, I should not have thought of sending it away."

"Oh, yes! I confess to being interested in it; and that's just where I feel the book will work evil—the trail of the serpent is there, covered with flowers."

Grace came forward as she spoke, and seated herself on a low stool near the feet of her hostess, with her own back to the light, and her yellow lashes lowered. Bella was facing what light there was left in the sky, and her eyes were open—wide open—and filled with an honest anger.

"Once more I must remind you, Grace, that Stanley Villars is my husband's friend and mine; I cannot hear him spoken of in this way."

"I should be untrue to the principles—the holy principles in which I have been reared—if I did not tell you what I think about it—if I did not lift up my voice in warning," Miss Harper said, humbly, just glancing through the pale lashes at the flushed, excited enemy.

"Having told me, let there be an end of it. I am not responsible for a line that may be in that book. I neither care to uphold nor to defend it. I simply want not to talk to you about it."

A sudden fear seized Bella that this girl, whom she had liked and trusted as a nice, soft, womanly creature, would be too many for her were warfare declared. Miss Harper was forcing the subject into a serious light; she was being solemn in her

severity, and seeming to threaten darkly. Bella grew very nervous. *Was* there anything so bad in the book that first holy principles—principles Bella revered to the full as much as did the fair Pharisee at her side—were assailed by it? Bella grew very nervous; but nervous as she was, it was farther than before from her mind to desert Stanley Villars.

"We should not shrink from a subject simply because it's unpleasant to us," Miss Harper rejoined.

"Now, Grace, that is all very well; but we all *do* shrink from an unpleasant subject. You'd shrink from it if it were unpleasant to you."

"Can it be pleasant to me to run the risk of offending you, dear?" Miss Harper asked, more effusively than was her wont.

"I don't know; but it's certainly pleasant to you to censure Stanley Villars."

"I want to spare you pain in the future. God knows what is in my heart!"

"Well, I don't!" Bella cried, almost writhing away from Grace's side. There was something terrible—something horrible—in this mixture of worldly animus with piety.

"Don't use a tone of levity about such things, dear!" Grace pleaded, with an earnestness that would have been very effective, had not Bella caught the quick glance that was levelled simultaneously through the yellow lashes.

"I am not going to use a tone of levity, or any other tone, about it any more!" Mrs. Claude replied, firmly. "You will please to recall two things to your mind that you appear to have forgotten: I am neither a child to be reprimanded, nor a heathen to be converted!"

"A word spoken in season——" Miss Grace was commencing, when Bella interrupted her.

"This is really too much, Miss Harper!" she cried indignantly. "Once for all—I will not hear another word, in season or out of season, on the subject!"

"*Only* this—oh, do, for your own sake!" Grace said, with a mild persistence, that was hard—very hard—to endure. "I know the Walsinghams so well—perhaps even better than you do—though you've married into the family. Forgive me—it's all interest for you, and desire to see you keep straight with them. They'd one and all think there was *pollution* in coming in contact

with one who could sympathise with the man who wrote that book!"

With that, she rose from her little stool at Bella's side, and Bella—her heart swelling with a dozen conflicting feelings—registered a vow on the spot to seek that man and his poor little wife on the morrow, and give them such comfort as it was in her poor power to bestow.

"It has been a thankless office, but I shall have my reward," Grace said modestly to herself, after saying her prayers that night; and, deceitful as she was, she really meant it. In fact, her deceit was of so fine a kind, that it imposed upon herself. She really believed that she had been actuated by some higher motive than a desire to irritate Bella into too warm a partisanship for Stanley Villars. She really fancied at some moments that there had been more sincerity than spite in her endeavours. She really imagined that she had been a practical as well as a professing Christian this night! And so she told herself, with a sort of humble unction, "that she would have her reward"—which I sincerely hope she will.

CHAPTER XLII.

"THAT WAS RATHER STRANGE."

All this time, while I have been tracing out, link by link, the chain of events which led her there, Bella has been waiting by the side of Stanley Villars' couch. She had come to the meeting this morning with a sort of defiant secrecy. Openly at breakfast had she ordered her carriage. Openly had she declared to Miss Harper that she was bent on a mission on which it did not suit her to be accompanied, to which declaration Miss Harper had listened calmly, with an unsuspicious air. It did not seem well to Grace to make Mrs. Claude confide. The withholding of confidence did not look so well; and, somehow or other, Miss Harper was not averse to seeing things that did not look well about Bella.

Bella had received a letter from her husband again this morning. "Ellen has been reading

'Never a Chance,'" he told her; "and she has done nothing but shudder ever since. I suppose he has run his head against a stone wall; but it's of no use saying a syllable about him here that can be considered justificatory. As we have drifted apart now, it's just as well that you never mention him, as you're apt to do, in your warm, honest way."

So her husband even, Claude the magnificent, on whose generosity she would far sooner have relied than on her own, thought that as the man was down—as he had fallen in the struggle—it would be quite as well to leave him there! Her blood curdled as she thought of what Stanley had been in those Denham days, and all his life before them. Her blood curdled; for when she remembered things at all, she remembered them with a terrible vividness that makes each recalled moment one of vital agony. "What *they* do, the cold-blooded wretches" (by "they" she meant her husband's family, and their own familiar friend, Miss Grace), "is nothing; but Claude should be different—Claude should remember my part in the business, and be merciful, or at least just."

She could not answer her husband's letter at once. She thought she would go and see Stanley first, and then, with the sight of him fresh in her mind, would come back and write such a letter to Claude as should at once bring him over triumphantly to her side. She had no design, when she started, of keeping aught she had done or was going to do from her husband. She meant to tell him all, the hour he returned. She had done no wrong; she was neither doing nor contemplating wrong. She was merely obeying the dictates of humanity; yet she took the first step into danger when she went off to see Stanley Villars without first writing to tell her husband that she was going to do so.

All hard feeling, all anger and indignation, against those who trampled on his name, and passed him by, vanished from her heart when she stood by the side of the man she had once loved, and marked, as the stranger who sees him not daily is quick to mark, that he was dying. It might be a little sooner or a little later. He might linger here and there, could any stage be made easy and pleasant for him; but the last journey was entered upon—he was dying!

He opened his eyes, expecting, as I have said, to see his sister Florence; but he gave no start when he saw Bella, only his heart thumped audibly, as he asked—

"Ah! how did you find us out?"

He said "us," holding out a hand towards the wife, who stood in the background. There was something very touching to Bella in that gesture, which identified the poor girl he had married at once and entirely with himself. He was such a thorough gentleman, you see! Bella proudly and promptly recognised the old trait—a thorough gentleman! quick to spare the feelings of any one who was weaker than himself.

His old love, his former friend's wife, gave her hand into his with the willing warmth a sister might have shown.

"I found you out through your wife, Stanley," she said simply. "God forgive us all," she added passionately, "for not having found you out before!"

Her thought showed itself clearly to him. *She* saw that it was too late, that he was a dying man. He had felt this sorrowful truth strongly within himself once or twice of late; but it oppressed

him with a new horror, now that it was illustrated, as it were, by the manner of another.

Wearily he turned his head round on the sofa pillow till only his profile was seen by the two women who stood over him, the one weeping with a wounding pain, the other wondering why this meeting, towards which she had decked the room, should be turning out so dismally. "I thought you would cheer him," she whispered presently to Bella; "he only wants rousing. He gets so dull when none of the men he knows are with him."

"They come often, I hope?" Bella asked, half hoping that "they" might be some of his old friends.

"Oh, yes! often; but then they smoke, and that makes him cough. When he gets rid of that cough, and needn't work so hard, he'll be all right, won't he? Won't you, Stanley?"

Marian asked this as we sometimes ask that which, in our own hearts, we dare not hope to have truly answered. For the first time it had struck her this day—this very hour, indeed—that there was a huge sorrow in store for her. For the first time she had come to the knowledge of

the wounding truth that her husband's was no mere ordinary illness.

He managed to bring his head round to face them again, as his wife's words died away.

"Marian, my pet!" he said; and Bella loved him so dearly then, in her own pure, honest heart, for thus addressing the woman who had superseded her — "Marian, my pet, you must tell Mrs. Walsingham how we met first. You must tell her what an angel you have been to me; and then, dear, she will love you, and understand how I love you too! Come, cheer up, pet!"

He smiled his old, sweet, protecting smile upon Marian; but the poor "pet" could not "cheer up." The dread that had seized her was so heavy and so strange; she could not cheer up under it.

"You shall tell me yourself, Stanley," Bella said, softly, drawing the lovely young face, down which the scalding tears were now pouring, on to her own shoulders. "You shall tell me, yourself; and first tell me, were you married when you came to see Claude and me?"

"Yes," he said.

"And you did not tell us. Oh! Stanley, that was not fair to me!"

"And he's been so ill since, and not one of his old friends has been near him; and I know that it's all because he married me-e-e." Marian sobbed out, miserably.

"Not a bit; his old friends will come, now they know where to find him, you silly child! Oh! I *wish* Claude were here," Bella cried impetuously; "he's away now with his father, who's ill you know; but as soon as he comes back I shall bring him."

Stanley's face fell.

"I shall not ask you many more favours, Mrs. Walsingham," he began, in a low voice. "Will you grant me one?"

"One, Stanley! a thousand if you will!" He looked at her very kindly.

"Rash, as of old, I see. Well,"—with a slight movement of his head, as though he would have thrown off the very memory of it—"that's past. This is my favour—I can't ask you not to come near us, now I see you, and find you——" He gulped, and could not finish his sentence, and Bella did what women are sure to do when they feel perplexed—wept copiously.

"Marian, go and get me a glass of lemonade,

dear," he said, suddenly; and when Marian was gone on his mission, he went on, hurriedly—

"I couldn't say it before *her*, poor darling; but I'm dying, Bella, *you* know that."

"Don't, don't!" she implored; "don't say it, Stanley!"

"It's true—I know it—and as I have little enough to live for, it's as well. Don't let me think, though, that you press Claude to see me against his will, or that he refuses to grant your request, as I shall think, whether he comes or does not come, if you go away intending to ask him. Don't let me think that."

"He will come; you don't know Claude."

"I *do* know him," he cried, starting up on his elbow. "Bella! by the old love that was between us once, don't subject me to such a cursed humiliation. It's nearly all over with me; don't you be the one to stab me at the last."

Her voice went up almost with a wail as she replied—

"It is *too* hard, *too* hard!"

"It is too hard—don't you make it harder."

"Stanley, I *can't* argue, but how you wrong my husband!"

He sank back again, flushed and breathless.

"Do you see what I am now?" he asked. "Do you see that it must be over soon? Bella! it's the last thing I ask of you. You have found me out—God knows through no will of mine—respect the secret you have surprised; let no one hear, through you, of me, and of my misery!"

He spoke bitterly and sternly, and Bella's heart throbbed to each accent of his, in fear, as it had never done in love.

"You are mistaken," she was beginning to plead; but he checked her, and repeated his charge, that through her no one should know of him and of his misery. "Unless you will promise me this, I will cut off the only pleasure left to me from the past. I will never see *you* again, and thus my poor little wife may lose a friend."

"But, unless I let it be known that she *is* your wife, how can I be her friend? as I will be, heaven help me, if I am permitted!"

But, with a man's perverseness, he would not see the force of this.

"You may be a friend to her when I am gone, but, while I live, I will live out of sight of the sneers that are given about me."

"Oh, Stanley! what a distorted view to take,"

she said; and then Marian came back with the lemonade, and the subject was dropped.

Mrs. Claude Walsingham sat there for an hour, after Marian came back with the lemonade, listening to the story of "how she (Marian) had met with Stanley." It was not such a very long story in itself, as the reader already knows; but it took a long time to tell, nevertheless, for Marian had not the art of telling things concisely. She interlarded her account with discursive passages—bringing in, without sufficient cause, the suggestions and suppositions Rayner, Miss Simpson, and others of that ilk, had indulged in. She told very artlessly how different her wedding had been to what she had always felt sure it would be if she married a gentleman. She did not say how different her after-married life had been! Poor girl! there was not the faintest shadow of complaint in the story that she told. It might have been bravery, or it might have been love, which kept her silent on this point. But whatever it was, Bella respected her for it.

I am not by any means sure that Mrs. Claude Walsingham listened attentively throughout the

recital. Anxious, as she was, to know all about it—to hear how he had come down to the depths he was in now—she could not avoid letting her mind wander. Her attention would lapse perpetually, and she would find herself thinking of the life of love and comparative leisure and literary ease he had led down at the little village when her first engagement had been made. She could but think of this, and compare it with this dismal room, which even the rich roses could not brighten—this room, rife with evidences of his penury—this room, in which his life seemed doomed to ebb away. The contrast would have been saddening to any woman; to one of Bella's temperament, it was nearly maddening.

When the story of how he had met with and married Marian had been told, they spoke of his book—of that "Never a Chance" which she had read with a sickening interest, feeling it to be partly a reflection of its author's life. He mentioned it in a tone that strove to be slighting, at first; but, with a woman's quickness, she discovered that he had a little pleasure in it still, and she fanned that pleasure as only a woman can.

"Everybody is speaking of it," she said, with the polite and surely pardonable deception that loving-kindness is apt to attempt to practise upon tyros in the craft sometimes—"everybody is speaking about it, and I see it so well mentioned by the reviews."

"Yes, it's gone into a third edition; but that means nothing; and several of the dailies have gone into raptures over it, which means less," he replied, with assumed indifference. "I shall do better than 'Never a Chance' by-and-by."

An eager look came over his pallid face as he said it, and his eyes kindled with such a terribly bright fire that the blinding tears came into Bella's eyes. It was hard for her to hear him say that, and to see him wasting away so surely and so fast. Whatever her sins towards him, grant that she was sufficiently punished for them now.

"And directly he makes a great deal of money by his books, we are going away to live in the country—ain't we, Stanley?" Marian asked.

"Somewhere near us, I hope," Bella suggested. And then the idleness of her hope, the bitter mockery of it, the futility of it, struck her with a

hard, stunning force: it is so bad when pain ceases to be sharp and stinging, and becomes crushingly weighty and dull! Bella could not sit under hers any longer, so she rose abruptly, saying—

"May I come again to-morrow with more roses?"

They both said "Yes," in a tone that told her what a gleam of sunshine in the darkness of their lives her presence was to them. Then she bade them adieu, and drove home, bitterly lamenting that she had been surprised into giving a promise of keeping Claude in the dark as to Stanley's state and Stanley's straits.

Perhaps it would place poor Stanley Villars in a more noble and exalted light before the reader if I said that on Bella's departure he disburdened himself to his wife of the secret of that engagement the rupture of which had ruined him. But I cannot say that he did, since, in fact, he did nothing of the kind; and I hold him to be right in thus maintaining reserve on a point which it could do no manner of good to make public.

There is probably a closed closet in every man's heart—a little cell that may not be dark as the

suspicious are apt to think it, but that is simply closed reverently in order to keep out prying eyes. Why should that closet be unlocked and ransacked for the benefit of one who is occupying or about to occupy the rest of the heart of which this cell is now but an unimportant corner? Whether the one who filled it once be dead or "only" gone away, she should at least be nameless to the new love, who will be wise if she never search for the little key that may open the door of the closet a man seems disposed to keep closed.

At any rate, Stanley Villars was not the style of man who opens his closet needlessly. Had the girl he married been of his own rank in life, she would probably have heard about the Bella Vane episode—heard of it as one hears of such things every day, carelessly. But since she had known nothing of it before, his tenderness for her—a tenderness that was less than love, perhaps, but more than friendship—determined him on keeping it from her still, on keeping silence and the closet closed.

I said that Bella went home bitterly lamenting having been surprised into giving a promise to Stanley of keeping Claude in the dark. She

bitterly lamented something else also, which was the loss of that belief in the good that is in all men, which Stanley had once possessed. It was gone from him now. It was patent to her in everything he wrote, and said, and looked, that a mighty distrust had come in its place—a distrust that was so hard, bitter, and deep that it poisoned all it dwelt upon. Remorsefully she thought about it, for his eyes had silently questioned when she was reproaching him with it once, during her visit.

> "How could it different be?
> Since thou hast been pouring poison
> O'er the bloom of life for me!"

Grace had had a pleasant morning's shopping, and was very satisfied with the result of her labours, when Bella met her, before dinner. Miss Harper appeared to have quite got over the little difference of the day before. She had that great art of being able to seem as if she had not only entirely forgiven, but entirely forgotten—a thing which renders lymphatic women dangerous to deal with. Bella, on the contrary, was one of those unfortunates who cannot forget being intentionally offended immediately, however it may be

about forgiving. So now she met Miss Harper a little more coldly than a wary woman would have done, and suffered Miss Harper to perceive that silence would be agreeable to her. She only addressed one question to Grace during dinner, in fact, which was—

"You went out with Lady Lexley this morning, I suppose?" To which Grace replied—"No, dear Mrs. Walsingham; by myself—I preferred it."

"That was rather strange, I think," Bella rejoined. Then she forgot the subject, and began wondering how she could at the same time be true to Stanley and to Claude.

CHAPTER XLIII.

VERY SORROWFUL.

EITHER the new novel, "Never a Chance," was having a tremendous run, or Mr. Mudie had taken a very insufficient number of copies. Whatever the cause, the result was that the subscriber who was, perhaps, most interested in the work, could not get the third volume the day she wanted it.

"It's really very annoying," Bella said, when they were back in the drawing-room after dinner; "*too* annoying! You're sure you've been more than once for it, Hill?"

Hill, standing at ease in the doorway, was very sure he had been more than once.

"Very annoying indeed," his mistress repeated in a thoroughly vexed tone; "a perfect nuisance! I wanted it particularly to-night. However!"

This "however" was intended, as the word at the end of a touchy sentence is usually intended,

to terminate discussion, namely, and to be taken as a declaration of the speaker's feeling the futility of saying more about it.

But Hill had been in the disappointed lady's service many years, and he took an old servant's interest in whatever interested her. He never, by any chance, omitted to look for that special paragraph in the advertisement-sheet of the *Times*—"Notice. The new novel, 'Never a Chance,' at all the libraries"—in these days. He almost took a personal pride in it, pointing it out to the select in the servants' hall, and dwelling upon it as upon a work in which, some way or other, he had a share. Many had been the surreptitious glances he had given to the contents of the two first volumes at odd moments, while his mistress had kept them near her favourite couch, to be at hand the instant she was seated. And the fact of the third volume being unattainable just now was to the full as distressing to him as it was to her. For a very tender heart beat beneath that plush, and the plight in which the heroine was left at the end of the second volume was sorely harassing to his feelings. So now, when his mistress said "however," in a very, very dejected, disappointed

tone, he conceived an idea, and delivered himself of it with surprising rapidity—

"There's the large library at Knightsbridge, Ma'am. No doubt it might be got there."

"You can't get it from Westerton's, any more than from Mudie's, at night."

"It might be tried. Shall I go, ma'am?"

"Yes; I'm very anxious for it. Manage it if you can, Hill," Bella replied, looking steadfastly at Miss Harper, who was trying to look grieved at such a perverted taste, and failing. On which Hill departed, leaving his mistress hopeful about getting the book, but rather inclined to think she had been rash in bringing it to the front as she had done before this calm enemy.

As soon as the man was gone the calm enemy arrayed herself for battle; in other words, took up some netting, which she always had on hand, and placed herself with her back to the light.

"You seem tired, dear," she commenced.

"I am tired," Bella replied, briefly; then she felt aggrieved at her fatigue, which was purely mental, being noticed, and added, "What makes you think me so?"

"You look so pale and harassed; besides,

your craving for the book is a sign that you're not up to doing anything better than reading it."

Bella gave a little gasping sigh. She was beginning to hate Miss Harper.

"Do let the book alone!" she said, almost angrily.

"Don't be afraid that I am going to reiterate what I said about it last night, dear!" she said gently. "I have made my protest. I have spoken once."

"Well, well, I know; don't, don't say any more about it, please."

"Not about the book, certainly," Grace replied, blithely, "since you can't listen to a dispassionate critique on anything that's written by any one you have known, but about the author—or, rather about his sister."

In spite of herself, Bella made a small movement indicative of curiosity. She turned her head round slightly towards Miss Harper, and evidently listened. Miss Harper marked that she did this, and, therefore, kept silence and bided her time.

"Well?" Bella said, interrogatively, after a minute.

"Two, three—that's right," Grace said, counting her stitches aloud. "I thought I had got into a mess. What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything—I mean, I asked you what you said," Bella replied, giving a glance of deadly hatred at the netting.

"I! I didn't speak, dear."

"I beg your pardon; you did just now," Bella said, with difficulty restraining her inclination to tell Miss Harper not to call her "dear" any more, but to come into an open field and fight it out.

"What did I say?" Grace asked, artlessly. How odious a frank manner is when we see behind it, and discern the treachery it seeks to mask. Bella saw behind the artlessness now; but the clearness of vision would do her small service, she began to fear.

"What did you say? as if you had forgotten already. Why, something about Mr. Stanley Villars' sister that you want to tell me, and I want to hear."

"Oh-o! Oh-o!" Grace said, with a prolonged sound on the "o" that was meant to express how very unimportant the whole thing was to her.

"Oh-o! yes, to be sure; she's going to be married."

"Florence?" She asked it with a blending of relief and amazement. There was balm in this at least, that the sister should be able to bury her dead and be happy, though the brother had been unable to do so. Memories of Denham days—of the days when Florence had loved Claude, and let her love be seen—came back to Claude's wife now, as she uttered the single word "Florence."

"Yes, Florence is her name; a very pretty girl, but not too clever, I understand. That's rather well though, as the man she's going to marry is not too clever either."

"Her brother doesn't know it!" Bella said hastily, and then Grace glanced sharply at her, and she felt that she had made a mistake, and faltered.

"I mean, *does* her brother know of it?" she said, blushing, and trying to keep the colour down by speaking very distinctly; as if anything would keep the colour down in a woman's face when she has made a false step, and is liable to be found out. "I mean, *does* her brother know of it?"

"Of course you meant that, for how should you know that he didn't know of it, not having seen him," Miss Grace replied, letting each word fall steadily on her listener's ear. "No, I don't suppose Mr. Chester has thought it necessary to have an official communication made to Mr. Stanley Villars."

"Who's Mr. Chester?" Bella asked. She felt that there was animus against Stanley in these speeches which Grace Harper let fall. She felt that there was animus; but after all she was moving in the dark, being utterly at a loss to account for it in any way.

"Mr. Chester is the man Miss Villars is going to marry."

"Do you know him?"

"I have met him two or three times. Lord Lexley knows him very well. He's such a booby."

"Poor Florence!" Bella cried, warmly. "You don't mean that, do you, Grace?"

"Well, I do mean it. Funny, isn't it, my giving you news of the Villarses? Oh! and I'll tell you something else, too. Don't picture your pet author pining in solitude. He's doing nothing of the kind."

She laughed as she said it. Laughed with a wicked meaning that shot like a bolt of ice through Bella's frame. Yet Mrs. Claude fancied that the promise he had extorted from her bound her to keep his secret and sit silent when he was aspersed. A sentence or two of the truth would have stopped the persecution she was enduring from inuendo, and left her nothing to fear. But, like a woman, she was over honourable in the wrong place, and so harm came of it.

As Grace's wicked laugh died away Hill came in, radiant with success, and with the book, the coveted third volume, in his hand. Then Bella took it, and with a faint hope that she might stop the conversation, and put an end to what would have sounded to her like insulting hints had she been able to fix a motive for them on Grace, said—

"You must excuse my talking any more, now I have got my book. I am tired, and I want to read. After tea I'll play."

"Certainly, I'll excuse you, dear. Just wait one moment though. Of course I couldn't tell you before Hill, but Mr. Stanley Villars has gone down indeed! He's leading an *awful* life, awful! Isn't it shocking?"

"I don't believe it," Bella said, with a sick qualm at her heart. "Who's your informant?"

"Lady Villars herself," Grace said, quietly. "I forgot to tell you I met her this morning."

"I thought you didn't know her."

"No more I did before to-day, but Fred Chester was with her, and he introduced me. You see he hunts down about us, so he introduced me to Lady Villars and his fair betrothed. It's always pleasant, if people are likely to meet in the country, to have met first in town, isn't it?"

Grace was relapsing into the old stolid simplicity, but Bella's belief in this quality was shaken now.

"It's strange you shouldn't have mentioned all this to me before, as you are staying with me," Mrs. Claude said, with a slight air of the injured hostess about her.

"Yes, it always does seem so mean not to say where one has been, and whom one has seen, doesn't it?" Grace asked, innocently.

"It also sounds strangely that Lady Villars should have reposed a confidence in you immediately. What did Florence say when Lady Villars told that—that *falsehood* about Stanley?"

"Miss Villars and Mr. Chester had moved to

another counter—they didn't hear it; after all," Grace continued, in an explanatory tone; "it wasn't a confidence. I said I was staying with you, and then we spoke of other things."

"Suppose we speak of other things now," Bella rejoined, with a lightness she was far from feeling. She scented danger, or, if not danger, at least difficulty, of some sort or other, but she did not know from which quarter to expect it; she was far from sure as to whether she feared it for herself entirely, even.

"I *wish* I had written to dear Claude before I went there yesterday," she thought; "I should have told him, and then there would have been an end of it; now I don't know what to do."

After this she was suffered to peruse her hardly-gained volume in peace, but there was no pleasure in the perusal. She was haunted the whole time by an uneasy feeling of having been indiscreet, and of therefore being on the high road to mischief—a feeling that very fortunately pervades the breast of every conscientious woman whenever she is guilty of that which, if less than a crime, is unquestionably more than a folly—concealment and secrecy.

Mrs. Claude Walsingham had a burning desire the following morning to ask Miss Harper when she was going, and to hint that she need not stand upon the order of her departure, but take it at once. However, hospitality is a sacred thing. This well-reputed young woman, with the colossal power of making herself unpleasant faultlessly, had been entrusted to her charge; therefore she must keep the precious deposit until time, or chance, or something equally kind, relieved her of it.

"When Claude comes back, I'll confess to him that I *hate her*, and her thick white skin," Bella thought to herself. "Oh! good gracious! the Markham was bad enough, but she was better than this!"

Miss Harper really was like a huge white elephant upon her hands. Grace was just one of those "fine" creatures that when hated at all, are hated with a tall, fat hatred that corresponds with their bulk, and is a wearisome burden to the feeler of it. Miss Harper was ponderous, mentally and bodily, when once you regarded her as other than a vast expanse of harmless, well-meaning white flesh.

For two hours and a half after breakfast, Mrs. Claude Walsingham sat and loathed her guest and her guest's netting. The round, well-covered white fingers caught her eyes and chained them, turn which way she would. Had the girl been awkward with these fingers, or quick with them —had they been other than the subtly slow, unvarying-in-purpose things they were, Bella could have borne them better. As it was, they acted on her nerves as organ-grinding or street ballad-singing does on mine and yours, fellow-sufferer from metropolitan harmony. They made her feel that she couldn't sit still, and that there was no relief to be gained by motion, and that anything on earth would be preferable to that combination of white cotton and whiter hands. They made her wish that Miss Harper ended at her throat like a cherub. They wrought her up into a highly nervous frame of mind, in fact, in which she went forth once more to see Stanley Villars.

She found Mrs. Stanley in tears in the passage, when she arrived, and she took the poor little baby-faced beauty, who was learning this world's sharp lesson of sorrow so early, to her warm, womanly heart, literally as well as figuratively.

She put her arms round the girl and held her within them closely, never thinking of Marian as other than of one to whom Stanley was dear, and who, she trusted, was dear to Stanley.

"I am so glad you're come!" Marian sobbed. "Oh! I'm so glad you're come!"

"What is it—tell me?" Bella asked, soothingly. "How is your husband? See! I have brought him grapes with the roses to-day!"

Marian looked at the basket—the basket Bella had arranged with her own hands—of grapes, and mosses, and roses. It was very pretty—very pretty, indeed; but the sight of it evidently brought no comfort to Marian to-day.

"Shall we go in to him?" Bella suggested, trying to edge her way out of the passage, which, by reason of being partially blocked up with all the rubbish that had accumulated during the whole term of their residence, was not a pleasant place to stand in.

"It's no use," Marian said, rocking her head backwards and forwards on her shoulders, dolefully.

"Why no use?" Bella asked, in a whisper.

"He's gone o—out!" Marian said, getting on

her feet, and relapsing into the manner of her sex and time of life, by trying to smooth her hair and adjust her belt and collar simultaneously.

"Gone out!" Bella repeated after her. Then Mrs. Walsingham walked in and sat down on the couch where Stanley had been lying the day before. "Gone out—in the state he is in!"

"He's ever so much worse to-day!" Marian said, piteously; "he was ever so much worse after you left yesterday. He *would* sit up, all I could say; and then it was nothing but drink and write, drink and write, all day, and all night, till he's half mad, I think!"

"Do you know where he is gone?" Bella asked—not, in truth, with any real desire for information respecting his destination, but simply because she felt that it would be better for them both that there should be speech, than that silence should reign.

"I don't know—perhaps down to the office, or up to Mr. Bligh's; shall we go and see?" Marian said eagerly. It seemed to her quite in the order of things that the pair of them should forthwith form an expedition, and start in search of Stanley, and bring him back bodily when found; but it

did not seem in the order of things to Mrs. Claude Walsingham.

"We can send my man with a note, that you shall write, to either of those places you speak of," Bella said, "and I will wait here with you till he comes back. What's the office?"

"His newspaper place. He would be sure to go there, if he could get as far; but he lost so much blood last night!"

"Lost so much *what?*" Bella asked, with a tremble in her tone that told of the pain she felt. "Lost so much *what?*"

"Blood! Oh, I didn't tell you that he broke a blood-vessel! It is all *so* miserable, Mrs. Walsingham; there is such a lot of it to tell," Marian said, putting up her hands, and hiding the light of day from her pale-worn young face.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A TRIO OF MATRONS.

Poor Bella! She wanted so much to be "good," very, very good now, and to make everything pleasant for all in whom she was interested. But the time seemed past for doing this. It was "too late" to make amends.

Her heart ached with a gnawing anguish that is only known to those who feel they have been guilty, as she sat there, in that dingy room, and thought of Stanley Villars, and, shudderingly, of the broken blood-vessel. She knew so well—for she was a quick-feeling, sympathetic woman—how this last evil had been caused. Mental exertion and mental pain had strained some delicate fibre; and the tide of life had rushed out, and would be liable to rush out at any moment.

To say that she was very sorry, very miserable, for all this, would not express to you a tithe of what such a woman as Bella suffers under such circumstances. The wages of her fault were not paid to herself; they were paid, seemingly, to the one against whom the fault had been committed. She, the sinner, was in purple and fine linen, while he, the sinned against, was in sackcloth and ashes.

The sense of her own helplessness in the matter depressed her, and made her appear so far less bright a woman than Marian had hitherto deemed her new friend to be. There had been previously an amount of warmth, earnestness, force, and brilliancy, about Mrs. Claude Walsingham; and these things are calculated to give the casual observer the idea of carrying all things before them. Marian had imagined all manner of good resulting from the dawning of Bella. But now Bella looked overcast—overcast as any common mortal, who wasn't full of beauty and vigour, might have looked. Marian stood looking at her with a vague sense of disappointment, as she sat on the couch, doing no more, and making things no better, than any other woman.

so piteously bewailed her own supposed share in Stanley's downfall; and replied quietly—

"Didn't you tell me yourself how you found him first? His grief and his restlessness had come before then, evidently."

"I suppose they had," Marian said softly. "I'm ready now. Do you think I shall do good?"

"You can do no harm," Bella replied; but though she said this, she was rather nervous as to the result of their mission. That her nervousness was fully shared she was well aware; for more than once on their way to Sir Gerald Villars', Marian broke the silence with a gasping sigh, and the words—

"I won't care what they say, or look, or think of *me*, if they'll only remember that he is their brother." The unaccredited ambassador was unmistakably quailing.

As for Bella, the only way in which she supported her courage was by reminding herself constantly that she "was in for it now." She had undertaken it, and must perforce go through with it; but she felt morally sure that, both by Claude and Stanley, she would be made to pay for having mixed herself up in the business.

Yet she had done no more than humanity had a right to expect from her. She had found a man in dark despair, in penury, in ill health; and the certain conviction was hers that she had been the cause of his fall into these things. However weak and erring he had been—however blindly perverse, and wickedly wasteful of the good gifts God had given him, which no woman could destroy—she could but feel herself to have been the first cause of the weakness and error, of the blind perversity and reckless wastefulness. What amends she could it was her bounden duty to make. This she knew. She also knew that she had set about making it in the wrong way. "*Why* didn't I write and tell Claude about it yesterday, before it grew?" she thought, as she found herself walking alone into Lady Villars' room, having thought it well that Marian should wait in the carriage till the ice was broken.

There were three of Lady Villars' sisters in the room when Bella entered. She saw at once that they were sisters, and shrewdly guessed that they had come up for the wedding.

"I think Florence is taking off her habit," Lady Villars said, "or else she's trying on some

dresses; would you hear?" addressing one of her sisters; "she'd so like to see Mrs. Walsingham."

"And I want to see her very much," Bella commenced in an agitated tone. "The fact is—I hope you won't think——" She broke down, and Lady Villars began to smile, and continued the same till her little short nose was almost lost in the plumpness of her cheeks.

"Think you late in your congratulations? Oh, dear, no! It's a very recently arranged affair—a brilliant match for the dear girl—if she were my own sister I couldn't have desired a better."

"I suppose not," Bella replied, looking at the aforesaid sisters. She did not mean to look sarcastic or anything else antagonistic to the "Carrie" interest just now; but she could not help feeling and showing that she felt that Lady Villars' fraternal toleration would not have been very severely taxed. The marriage that was pronounced fitting for Miss Villars, might surely have been held suitable for one who owed all of social consideration that she enjoyed to the Villars alliance.

"I suppose not. No, it was not congratulations I came to offer." Then she rose from the seat she

had taken on first entering the room, and said hurriedly, "I had better not go round the subject. Stanley is dying—and his wife has come here with me (she's in my carriage) to tell you so."

Lady Villars shook her well-arranged little head resolutely.

"I'm sorry you've permitted yourself to be made a tool of," she said. Then she turned her head slightly over her shoulder, fixed an obedient sister with her cool blue eyes, and whispered in a tone that was not intended to reach, and that did not reach Bella's ear—"Stop Florry from coming."

"A tool of!" Bella repeated the words warmly. She had anticipated its all being such easy work, as far as the Villarses were concerned. The sole difficulties she had foreseen had been with Stanley and her husband.

"A tool of! you don't understand——"

Lady Villars stopped her with an ejaculation.

"Good gracious! how cruelly you have been imposed on!" she cried. "*We* know all about it—the whole story."

"And you're leaving him to live if he can, and die if he must?" Bella asked it with a biting scorn, that made Lady Villars tingle. "You can't

know the whole story: your brother has struggled till he can struggle no longer; don't stay to think whether he has been to blame or not, but help him up again."

"I am sure you mean well," Lady Villars replied, in the tone evil-disposed people use to little children when wrath is in possession of the latter; "but you are so *dreadfully* mistaken. It's shameful of Stanley—it's the worst thing I have heard of him yet—to have let you mix yourself up with the matter!"

"Won't you see his wife?"

"His wife, Mrs. Walsingham!"

"Won't you send his brother to him?—there's his address;" she forced a card, on which she had written down the name and number of the street in which Stanley lived, into Lady Villars' unwilling hand.

"Sir Gerald will please himself about going," Lady Villars replied, adjusting her fair plump face and insignificant features as severely as she could; "but as a married man, I should *hope* he'd have the good taste to keep clear of a den of profligacy!"

"You do not believe what you are saying, Lady

Villars! You are trying to harden your own heart with phrases."

"I am striving to save myself from being influenced by unhealthy sham emotions," Lady Villars replied, spitefully.

"Let me see Florence!" Bella urged, not heeding the insinuation.

The third sister, who had remained quiescent during the interview, now rose, and said she would "go and look for Florry." Presently she came back. "Florence is not come home," she said.

Bella gave vent to an impatient exclamation.

"She is out, you tell me, now; but will you tell her what I came about when she comes home?"

Lady Villars paused for an instant or two before she answered; then she said—

"You can hardly be serious, Mrs. Walsingham, in wishing to bring Miss Villars into communication with her brother's mistress; if you choose to risk your own reputation so recklessly, I must ask you to consider Miss Villars'."

"No woman's reputation will be endangered by intercourse with the poor young girl Stanley has married, to their mutual cost——"

"Married!" Lady Villars struck in scoffingly.

"Really, Mrs. Walsingham, if you persist in showing yourself all over London with her, I must beg that you will not again subject me to the insult of having that creature seen at my door. I wonder Major Walsingham permits it—if he knows anything about it!"

She added this last clause suddenly, on seeing Bella wince when surprise at her husband's "permitting it" was expressed. It was a very telling volley. It routed the already nearly exhausted enemy.

"My husband will judge for himself, Lady Villars."

"And I will judge for *my*self in this matter," Lady Villars replied. She was very much afraid that Florence might perchance escape from her guileless detainers, and come down and find Bella, when the whole thing would explode in an explanation.

Mrs. Claude Walsingham felt that she was vanquished, and it was very hard for her to feel this, with her love of ordering things according to her own inclination. It was very hard to go out of that room, and that little plump, short-nosed woman's presence, with a sense of defeat upon her.

It was harder still to feel that the defeat must be made known at once to that anxious young watcher in the carriage.

She made no pretence of offering her hand to Lady Villars. There was hostility in her heart against that admirable matron, whose course of conduct was so correct that all men's tongues wagged in praise of "it," but never of "her." Bella felt that, on the surface, right was with Lady Villars. The latter was cold-blooded, cold-hearted, calculating, cruel, but she was very correct. The diabolical ingenuity with which she brought her virtuous scruples to the aid of her old spite against Stanley, staggered the woman in whose breast resentment and malice never obtained.

As Mrs. Claude Walsingham walked away through the hall, after bidding her hostess farewell with a cold bow, Lady Villars asked her sister—

"How did you keep Florence away?"

"I told her there was a bore calling—that was enough." Then the truthful, honest, young creature got behind the curtain, and peeped out at Mrs. Walsingham's carriage and contents.

"Don't look! What's she like?" Lady Villars asked in a breath.

"An impudent-looking thing."

"Don't let them see you on any account! Golden hair, hasn't she?"

"Yellow!" the sister answered, scornfully.

"Ah! Piesse and Lubin are universal benefactors in these days. I hope Mrs. Walsingham will get it from her husband," Lady Villars continued, letting her words out in a series of snaps.

"So wrong of her," the sisters chimed in. The sisters had a habit of chiming in with any sentiment, and of chorussing any remark the wealthy married one of their band elected to make. They too, young innocents, saw visions and dreamt dreams; and the dreams were all of days of delight at Gerald's shooting-box, in the autumn; and the visions were more glorious still, of a season in town, next year, under Carrie's wing.

"Wrong! it's idiotic!" Lady Villars said, sharply.

"Yes; what has she to do with it?" the obliging sister went on. "How violent she was, Carrie; I expected to see ever so much prettier a woman. There was such a fuss about her."

"There was only a fuss about her because there was no one else to make a fuss about. Florence is much better looking."

Lady Villars knew that Florence's beauty was not precisely the theme which would be most pleasant to her present auditors. But she was thoroughly sisterly in her treatment of the three young beings whose hopes for the future she held in her own plump hand. She kept them under by allusions to Florence's manifold superiorities over them, just as she kept Florence under by allusions to the many losses they sustained through her.

"Well, I don't so over-much admire Florence either; she has but one expression."

"Ah! but that's such a sweet one," Lady Villars replied, laughing. "She never troubles herself to be envious and jealous, and so her face keeps fair and smooth."

Mr. Chester was coming to Sir Gerald's to dinner this day, and whenever he was asked to dinner he had a habit of coming an hour-and-a-half too soon, in order, as he expressed, that he "might have a little talk with them." As the whole family were generally engaged in their dressing-rooms at these times, he ordinarily spent

this hour-and-a-half in standing about desolately, and wishing he "hadn't come so soon." This day, however, Lady Villars left word that when he came he should be shown into the library, and she herself told at once that he had arrived.

She was down upon him before he had had time to offer up one regret on the shrine of his self-importance, for that he had come to solitude. She was cool and crisp, and entirely herself again, now; indeed it was an attribute of hers to be neither readily nor long ruffled by anything.

Extending both hands to him as she entered (how he wished that Florence would learn that "little way" of Carrie's!), she commenced—

"My dear Fred, I have something very important to say to you; how *good* of you to have come in such nice time."

He thought that it was very good of himself, considering how often he had done it before, and how invariably melancholy had claimed him for her own in consequence.

"I haven't even told my husband yet. I feel that it's so essential that *you* should know it at once."

"Nothing gone amiss, eh?" he asked, nervously. He knew very little of Florence's character. It occurred to him as just within the bounds of possibility, that she might have gone away through a back window, with a little bundle, to the arms of some young Lochinvar of whom he had never heard.

"No; nothing gone wrong *yet*," Lady Villars replied, with an emphasis that made him feel that something had intervened to stop the flight—say a nail, on which Florence's dress had caught, or an accident on the railway along which she was speeding.

"No; nothing gone wrong *yet*, and I do hope that your sound sense will step in and save us from anything going wrong at all. You know about Stanley?"

She asked it with a very well done look of pity for the sinner, and detestation for the sin. Fred Chester nodded assent.

"I positively shudder," Lady Villars continued, with a little shake that was not nearly as well done as the look—"I positively shudder to think of it!"

"So would any one," Fred Chester said, nobly

forgetting, in the pleasure of being the chosen witness of the shudderings of such a "charming woman" as Lady Villars, even to attempt the smallest bit of "business" on his own account.

"The woman! the creature! forced her way here to-day." Lady Villars spoke in a low tone, as though she were afraid of polluting the silky ears of a King Charles spaniel, who was lying on the rug, with the infamous tidings.

"By Jove! you don't mean to say so?"

"I do. Oh! it's shocking! Mrs. Claude Walsingham came with her."

"Hulloa! if Mrs. Claude Walsingham came with her, that looks rather——eh?—doesn't it?—eh?"

"Doesn't it look what?" she replied sharply.

"Why, rather as if there were some truth in what Flo thinks—that he's married!"

"Flo thinks!" she repeated, sarcastically. "You *must* know so *much* better."

"But Mrs. Walsingham is——"

"A very foolish, rash, impetuous person," she interrupted, "and I fear, I very much fear, not at all too strait-laced herself. We shall hear more of Mrs. Claude Walsingham one day, I'm

afraid. That's not the point, however. What do *you* wish about Florry?"

She asked him "what he wished?" as a matter of form, in order that she might tell her husband afterwards "what Fred Chester said."

"I hardly know."

"Of course one hardly does know," she said, encouragingly. "I suppose you'll never suffer Florence to see her."

"Oh! never!" he answered with as much decision as an imperfect comprehension of what she had said could supply him with.

"And till Stanley gives up the connection you'll never suffer Florry to see him either?"

To this he replied, "Certainly not!" and then Lady Villars, having got all she wanted out of him, left him to his own devices and desolation, and went up to her husband's dressing-room, and told him of the raid that had been made upon her respectability that day, and of Fred Chester's firm, and "certainly proper," determination "never to let one of the lot come in contact with Flo while Stanley had that creature with him."

"What I have gone through to-day no one

can tell!" Carrie said, as she saw her husband look black.

"It's an astonishing thing that you women will always be deuced hard just where you should be lenient," he said angrily. "I have known you so uncommonly gentle in your judgment of other men, and so wonderfully ready with the argument that if you examine the private characters of all your male acquaintances, with a view to purging your list, you'd soon not have a name left upon it, that I can't quite understand your animosity against Stanley."

"Then I must be content to do my duty and be misjudged, Gerald," she said, meekly. "I will only say that dear Florry has been a great anxiety—thank God, I shall soon be relieved of it!"

"Thank God that you will—since you're always hurling it at my head," he replied without looking at her.

Mrs. Claude Walsingham had gone back to her carriage with a sense of her defeat upon her strongly. How should she tell the hard truth—that they had no pity for and no faith in her—to the poor, worn-out young wife, who was

waiting? How should she do it? How could she have the heart to do it? She asked herself this question, sadly, and she could give herself no answer.

She was saved the trouble of telling it in words. Marian leant forward eagerly as Bella came through the doorway and down the steps, and saw that in the face of her beautiful friend there was sorrow and rage, and little else.

"They don't care for him any more," the girl said, in a low harsh voice, as Bella seated herself in the carriage. "I can see—they don't care—they'll let him die, and I'm the one——"

She stopped and burst into tears, and Bella said—

"I did not see his own brother or sister—I only saw his sister-in-law. She's cold and heartless; but the others are different—don't despair."

But the girl only shrunk more closely into the corner of the carriage, sobbing.

"Oh, Mrs. Walsingham! if I could only be unmarried from him, I'd leave him at once, and —then—they'd come to him; and I'd—do—it—though I love him so."

The words came out from the bursting heart with such a mighty power of truth, that they forced from Bella the inward prayer—

"God forgive those who are trying to fix the stigma on her of *not* being his wife—I can't."

Stanley had not returned when they went back.

"I shall come again to-morrow," Bella said, and then she kissed Marian, and tried to force something into the girl's hand. But Marian started, and shook her head, and put the proffered gift back.

"No, Mrs. Walsingham; not that," she said, shaking her head. "It may come, but not yet."

"Oh, Marian! and I have so much," Bella pleaded.

"And I have *nothing*, but the hope that Stanley will never be brought so low as to live on charity through *me*. Don't be angry, Mrs. Walsingham, it's all I have."

CHAPTER XLV.

A THUNDERSTORM.

THE servant who opened the door to Mrs. Claude Walsingham on her return home from her mission of mercy, looked so pleasurably excited that Bella naturally felt convinced that something horrible had happened. "Master's home, m'm," he said, as his mistress stepped into the hall.

"Home is he? where?" she asked hastily.

"And master's father is dead, m'm," the man replied, with the proud resolve to be the one to break the bad news, which is a strong passion in the breasts of the lower ten thousand. The man had no ill or any other feeling connected with Mr. Walsingham deceased, but he told of that gentleman's death with an unctuous satisfaction, slightly—and but slightly—dashed with sorrow, that was refreshing to behold.

Mrs. Walsingham started. So the kindly, polite old gentleman, her father-in-law, was dead! Well, she would have felt it very much had she been down at the Court at the time. She had been away from his atmosphere for some months now, however; so, though she started, it was neither with great sorrow, or great horror. It was merely with surprise.

"Dead is he! Where's your master?"

"Gone out, m'm. Mrs. Markham came back with master."

"Oh, did she!" Bella said, walking on. She did not ask "where Mrs. Markham was?" It occurred to her that she would know that soon enough. "I wish Claude had waited in till I came home," she thought, as she went into her dressing-room, "then I could have told him about poor Stanley at once."

It came upon her strongly now, as she reflected how much she had to tell "about Stanley," that she had been unwise in that she had not written some of it to her husband. It was rather a long story. Not so much a long story, perhaps, as a difficult story to tell with the conviction upon her that a portion of it should have been told before.

It lengthened and grew more intricate as she sat there thinking about it. Lady Villars' remarks would have to be repeated; and Lady Villars' remarks and Lady Villars' manner had not been pleasant to Bella, even in the midst of the fervour and heat of her philanthropic mission. But now, when that fervour had toned down a bit, and that heat had cooled by reason of her having come out of the presence of the creators of it, Lady Villars' manners and remarks seemed more unpleasant still, and she felt that Claude would be righteously angry at his wife having subjected herself to them.

There was an element in Claude's nature which his wife had always been conscious of, without ever having called upon herself to define. It was an element which he kept under greatly, but still it was *there*. It was that which brought the red spots to his eyes when anger seized his soul. It was a strong, hot, furious fierceness, in fact, which could be very cruel. He had given vent to a little of it on the occasion of that fall she had had from Devilskin under Jack's auspices. "Ah! it doesn't do to sit and think when one's nervous," she said, abruptly starting to her feet, after

dwelling for a minute or two on that incident. "I'll go and see the Markham, and apologise for not having been in to receive her, when I didn't know she was coming."

Accordingly, Bella having heard from her own maid that Mrs. Markham had installed herself in a suite of rooms that seemed good to her, went off to welcome and condole with her guest. Went prepared to fulfil all the rights of hospitality, and avert with kindly words any wrath, the seeds of which might have been sown during her inopportune absence.

Her tap at the door was answered by a lachrymose "come in" from Grace Harper, and entering, she found that young lady installed on the little couch at the foot of the bed, with a brace of pearly tears on her nose, and a list of mourning habiliments to be procured in her hand —all for the deceased Mr. Walsingham. Mrs. Markham was seated opposite to her friend, recruiting herself after her journey with sherry and biscuits, and enlivening the repast by giving details connected with the "late mournful event."

"I am so grieved to hear," Bella was commencing as she hastily advanced towards her

sister-in-law; and, to do her justice, she *was* grieved the instant she saw Mrs. Markham, for Mrs. Markham's face was care-worn and pain-lined. "I am so grieved, Ellen; and that I should have been out too!"

She had given out her hand frankly towards Claude's sister, and now she bent her face forward to greet Mrs. Markham with a kiss. It was such a sweet, glowing, lovely face that was extended, that no man or woman on earth could have resisted giving it the salute it asked for. Mrs. Markham bent her stiff neck with a jerk, and brought her mouth down with a bony kiss—a kiss in which Bella felt nothing so much as the teeth—on Mrs. Claude's bright cheek.

"We must submit to the Lord's decrees," she said, as she brought her kiss to a conclusion, snapping it off suddenly in a way that seemed to show that she inwardly protested against the weakness of which she had been guilty. The remark not being one that was exactly calculated to set the ball of conversation rolling, Bella held her peace for an instant or two, and then said—

"Yes; I'm so sorry I was not at home. I wish Claude had waited for me."

Mrs. Markham reseated herself, and then assumed that most terrific of all feminine expressions—the mysterious. When a woman puts on this, a home in the howling wilderness would be preferable to a boudoir, all silk taboret and Sèvres china, in her vicinity.

"It certainly would have been better had you been at home on Claude's arrival," Mrs. Markham said presently, and her tones were a degree and a half more mysterious than her looks. The stranger on whose ear they might have fallen might have been forgiven for imagining that murder, arson, and general unpleasantness had been the result caused by Bella's absence. "It would have been better—much better," she repeated, emphatically.

"I hope you've been made quite comfortable?" Bella asked, trying to ignore all the disagreeable meaning in her sister-in-law's voice.

"Thank you, I have," Mrs. Markham replied, icily.

"The woman won't let me like her, however well inclined I am," Bella thought. Then she asked aloud—

"Mind you command me absolutely, Ellen.

Let me save you all trouble about the—about the mourning, I mean," she added in a lower key, touched to solemnity by her subject.

"You are very kind." Mrs. Markham spoke in a rigid tone. Intuitively Bella felt that something had gone wrong.

"Did Claude say where he was going? and what have you been about while I have been out, Grace?" Bella asked in a breath.

Miss Harper's lips parted, but before she could utter a word Mrs. Markham said—

"Claude did *not* say where he was going. He was met on his return home, in grief for the loss of a parent, by news which upset him considerably."

"What was that news? and who gave it to him?" Mrs. Claude asked quickly.

Mrs. Markham sipped her wine and crumbled her biscuit, not "nervously"—she was not the sort of woman to relapse into nervousness on slight provocation—but tremulously. Her tremulousness usually arose from anger, Bella knew; and, knowing this, Bella watched it somewhat anxiously.

"What was that news? and who gave it to

him?" Mrs. Claude repeated her question with that slight additional emphasis which betokens the birth of an intention not to be trifled with in the speaker. It was very slight in her case, but she, not being a gusty or showy-mannered woman, marked all these fluctuations of feeling very delicately, though clearly.

"What the news was you will hear soon enough. I cannot tell you who told it to him."

Mrs. Markham spoke in a monotone. She had told herself that it behoved her to betray neither anger nor excitement; therefore she adopted that tone which is of all others most calculated to drive the one who hears it into angry despair. Turbulent violence may be endured and baffled; but calm virulence is simply maddening in its effects.

"Don't torture me by speaking in that way," Bella said quickly. "Do *you* know anything of this, Grace?" she continued, looking Miss Harper fixedly in the face.

"Nothing more than you've heard from dear Mrs. Markham," Grace replied, meekly.

Bella's heart swelled. It seemed to her that her husband had been wanting in certain attri-

butes with which she had loved to endow him, in having left her to the mercy of these discreet women, who knew, and looked, and thought all manner of things which they were too guarded to say. Her heart swelled, and the angry tears started into her eyes. She had no intention of suffering them to fall in such company, however, so she walked to the door, saying—

"Since I can be of no assistance to you now, I'll leave you till Claude comes home."

"You dine at the old hour, I suppose?" Mrs. Markham asked, coldly.

"Yes, the same. I shall go and rest now." Then she went off to her own dressing-room again, and coiled herself up on a couch, and tried to care for the last pages of "Never a Chance," and forget the shadowy doubts that had been created in her mind. But she could do nothing but move about restlessly, and wish that Claude would come and say out the news that he had heard when he came home.

He came at last. She, starting up and throwing down her book at the sound of his foot in the passage which led down to her dressing-room, went forward to the door to meet him. Even as

she went forward hastily, her quick ear detected in the sound of his step that there was something wrong.

His gaze met hers the instant the door was opened, and the red spots that came into his eyes when he was angry were in them now, as they met his wife's. He kept his hand on the door-handle still, too, instead of putting it round Bella, as he was wont to put it when she had her arms round his neck and her face on his breast, as she had them now.

She had seen in the momentary glance she had given that his face looked pale and hard. Perhaps he was grief-stricken only, for he had loved his father well, though with none of the warm affection his father had lavished upon him. "Dear Claude!" she said, and her voice was very soothing and sympathetic, "I am so sorry, dear! and that I shouldn't have been in to hear it from you first when you came."

He just brushed her brow with his lips in reply, and then he moved her away from him and said—

"Here! let me get into the room!"

She stood back then, feeling rebuffed and discomfited, and let him get into the room. When

he was in, he flung himself on the couch, first flinging the volume that she had been reading into the corner of the room.

His doing that reminded her of the Stanley Villarses, and of all she had to tell him. "He is worn out with his journey and his loss, poor boy," she thought. "It will take his mind from his own sorrows a little if I tell him about poor Stanley."

"Claude, dear, I have something to say to you," she began, sitting down by his side, and laying her hand on his shoulder. She gave a wistful, pleading look into his face as she spoke, and somehow the expression recalled the one she had worn the first night of their meeting in that old cathedral town, when she had implored him to remain at the inn, "in order that she might feel that she had a friend in the house."

"And I've something to say to *you*," he replied, banishing the remembrance of that expression, with all its softening influences, as he spoke. At the same time he took a letter from his pocket, and half opened it, glancing down at its contents in a way that seemed to imply that it had some connection with that matter on which he was going to speak to her.

"What is it, Claude?" she asked; and her breath failed her as she asked it, for she, too, had glanced at the half-opened letter, and recognised the characters in which it was written as being identical with that anonymous letter of which mention has been already made.

"Is it true that you have been—by Jove! I won't give you an opportunity of deceiving me further," he interrupted himself, savagely—"it *is* true that you have been flaunting about town with a couple of—of women with whom it's not too creditable to be seen, and picking up with nice associates!"

"Claude, stop——"

"When I have done," he went on, ruthlessly. "It's true—I see it in your face. Why the devil didn't you attend to what Miss Harper said?"

"Attend to what Miss Harper said?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Yes. When I read this letter—*there's* a pleasant epistle to greet a fellow the first thing after such an absence from home as mine has been." He picked the letter from his pocket again as he spoke, and flung it into her lap.

"What is it?" she asked. "Who's it from?"

"It's anonymous——"

Before the word was well out of his mouth, she had flung the letter from her with a gesture of loathing and contempt that was so genuine and so strong that he paused to look at her. Presently he resumed—

"If you'll read it you'll see——"

"If I'll read it?" she repeated, sorrowfully. "Claude! can you ask me to do it—can you believe I would do it?"

"Then I must speak to you about its contents," he said, sternly; "which may be more unpleasant to you still. It was to save you the pain of hearing the truth in so many hard words that I gave you the option of reading the letter which made me acquainted with it."

"With what?"

"The truth."

She bowed her head. "I will hear it from you, Claude," she said, quietly. She was remembering very vividly now how remorse had oppressed her for having read an anonymous slander of him.

"You will not deny, I suppose, that you have been exhibiting yourself about with Lady Lexley in the park, and in Regent Street, and God knows where else?"

"Of course I have!" she replied, wonderingly.

"Why on earth did you do it? Why select her from every other woman under heaven to help you in carrying out your sentimental, half-philanthropic, imbecile intrigue?"

"I do not understand you," she said, firmly; but, though she spoke firmly, her heart was very low. She saw herself entangled in the web that had been partially woven by her own absurd reticence.

He rose up and began to pace about the room, by way of keeping his anger active.

"Not understand me!—you do. If it's true that you have been day after day into some low purlieu to see Stanley Villars, and the girl he has picked up—and you'll scarcely deny *that*—you must understand me."

"Claude, don't be hard and hasty. I will tell you all—everything," she cried, starting up and clinging to his arm.

"By Jove! I have heard enough already to turn a fellow sick," he said, hotly. "Here this letter meets me on my return——"

"And *you* regard it for an instant? Oh, Claude!" She thought again of the one she had

received; but she was not made of the stuff that strives to make others display generosity by vaunting its own.

"Regard it! Well, it annoyed me preciously, I confess, to learn that you should be spoken about at all; and then to hear what I have heard since."

"Will you tell me all you have heard? then I will defend myself," she said; "but before you tell *me* anything, I want to say that I *have* been to Stanley Villars and his wife; and you must go too, for, Claude, he's dying."

Her voice broke down as she said that; it seemed so unnatural a thing that Claude should be hard on the subject of Stanley now.

"Dying! what nonsense you women talk!" Major Walsingham said, angrily. Then he looked at her, and softened a little—"Poor girl!" he said, kissing her; "I really think you believe it."

"Believe it! Oh, Claude!" and then she poured out a portion of her story.

"The broken blood-vessel is bosh! simply a fabrication of the ingenious young lady who induced you to compromise yourself by taking her to Lady Villars'. I was coming through the

Strand just now, and I saw Mr. Stanley reel out of some tavern. It's disgusting—actually disgusting!"

"He must have reeled from some other cause than intoxication," she said, sorrowfully.

"He's gone to the bad entirely, I tell you, Bella. It's absurd of you to affect to disbelieve what every one knows: he's lost to every decent feeling," he continued, angrily, "or he would never have made the parade he has of being driven to despair by your—your throwing him over."

She blenched. "Don't speak of it in that way, Claude," she said, quickly. "God knows I am telling you what I firmly believe to be the truth, when I tell you that Stanley Villars is dying now. His poor wife was broken-hearted to-day—that's why I took her to Lady Villars; I wanted to see Florence."

"His wife! Well, I'll say nothing of that part of it; only I won't have you mixing yourself up with her. How on earth did you ferret her out?"

She told him "how kind Lady Lexley had been."

"Very imprudent of you!" he said, with a scowl—"very imprudent, indeed!—you couldn't have made a more injudicious selection of a companion into a romantic scrape if you had tried."

"You told me yourself to call on her, Claude."

"To call on her, but not to career about all over town with her. Grace Harper says she told you to be careful—didn't she?"

"Sketchily."

"In what other way could a girl tell you?" he asked.

"So *she* has been improving the aspect of things in your eyes, while I was absent and undefended, Claude?"

He hesitated.

"I was so annoyed that I let Ellen see that cursed letter, warning me of 'your imprudence!'" he said at last; "and then she told Grace."

"But—excuse me, Claude, for speaking in such a way of your friend—it seems to me that she had no right to discuss my conduct."

"She tried to make the best of it," he began. "She said she felt sure you hadn't done any of these things, as she had cautioned you against doing anything that might annoy my family.

Now, Bella, you must feel conscious that this picking up with Stanley Villars and that girl is not at all the sort of thing which my wife may do with credit."

"Claude, I didn't believe that Stanley has forfeited his claim to our friendship when Lady Villars said it, and I don't believe it now. He has been unhappy, and in his unhappiness he has been reckless, to the injury of his health."

"He's a dissipated drunkard," Claude said, sternly.

"Claude! those are cruel words! Oh! my dear husband, don't use them about Stanley; he's failing so fast!"

"And no wonder, when he drinks at the rate he must to have been in the state I saw him in, in the Strand, to-day. 'Failing fast' is a shallow euphemism; he's softening his brain with gin and water."

Major Walsingham believed that what he was saying was true, otherwise he wouldn't have said it. But there was little sorrow in his heart for this truth. He forgot his old friendship for Stanley now. He could only remember that Stanley, through what Claude termed "his cursed

maudlin sentimentality," had kept the fact of having been jilted by Bella fresher in the minds of men than was desirable.

Bella shuddered. "How you have changed to him!" she said presently. "He knew you better than I did!"

"What did he say about me?" he asked.

"He asked me not to humiliate him by begging you to go and see him, as he felt sure you wouldn't."

"I wish he had had the decent feeling not to try and link your name with his again. He's had the good taste to keep clear of his own family; I wish to God he had extended his consideration to mine!"

So they talked the subject over, neither convincing the other, or being shaken for an instant in their respective beliefs and opinions. But Bella was a woman; and it is the woman's part to give up, whether convinced or not. She played her part very gracefully.

"I grieve for everything connected with the business, dearest Claude; but I hope you'll believe me when I say that I grieve for nothing so much as for having acted in a way you don't approve

of. Will you forgive me?" She looked at him very lovingly as she spoke; so lovingly that he bitterly repented him of his harshness. She was not the type of woman to need it.

"Forgive you! I should think so! but you mustn't perform romantic exploits again, dear."

"I won't," she said; "but I wish——"

"There! not another word!" he interrupted. "I wish too, all sorts of things. If Stanley doesn't drink himself to death, the time will come when he'll shake himself clear of all this mire, and be ashamed of it. Then I'll hold out my hand to him, not before; and mind you, Bella, I'll not have you do it either!"

He was all the lord and master, the man to be obeyed without question or demur, as he said this.

"So be it, Claude," she said, quite meekly; love had thoroughly tamed her.

They separated to dress then; but when she was ready, she went and knocked at his door, and asked him, "might she come in?" On his giving her permission, she went in and talked to him of his father's death, and of their own altered condition.

"Shall you live much at the Court?" she asked.

"Oh, yes! a good deal. We'll go to the Highlands for a few weeks after the funeral? And I tell you what, Bella—you may as well ask your mother to meet us at the Court on our return, and stay a short time with us."

"Thank you, dear; that will be very nice," she replied absently.

"And when Mrs. Vane goes, it may be as well to give my mother to understand—very delicately, you know, but clearly—that it perhaps will be well for all parties that there shouldn't be two mistresses at the Court, and that it would be better for her to live in the village; *you* must do that, dear."

"Very well; as you please, Claude," she said slowly.

"Is there anything the matter?" he asked, advancing towards her as he was tying his cravat. "Don't think any more of our difference, dear. I have told you what I think and what I feel, and now it's over. Be a sensible little woman, and don't dwell gloomily upon it."

She got up and utterly spoilt the symmetry of the bow of the carefully tied cravat.

"Oh! Claude!" she moaned sorrowfully, clinging to him, "I feel as if a boat were going down before my eyes! I wish so to do right! I wish so to do right! and it *is* right to obey you; but my heart is torn!"

"I should rather think it was right to obey me!" he said good-humouredly. "You silly girl! to go into heroics for nothing!"

"Well, I won't again, Claude; but grant me one favour."

"What is it?"

"Don't let either Mrs. Markham or Miss Harper"—and her eyes flashed as she named them—"feel that I am in the pitiable position of a distrusted or an indiscreet wife."

"What an absurd girl you are!"

"Not so absurd! Your sister is your sister, and means well by you, I'm sure. Remembering this, I can forgive, and but just forgive, the insultingly suspicious guard she has attempted to mount over me from the moment of my first meeting with her. But that white-faced hypocrite has no such claim on me; and when she leaves my house this time, she shall never darken my doors again."

"This is absurd prejudice, dear," he said carelessly; "you'll think better of it by-and-by." Then they went down to dinner, and rather puzzled their guests by their demeanour to one another.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DEAL GENTLY WITH THE ERRING.

THE majority of us have seen a boat go down. I do not mean that we have, most of us, stood on a shingly beach, and looked over the leaping waves at the terrible sight of a slight thing of planks and spars battling with the awful, angry element! Some of us have witnessed that spectacle, and sickened at it, and prayed earnestly enough to the great God of Mercy to save us from a repetition of it. But there is another and a sadder wrecking—the wrecking of a human bark on the ocean of life, and that, the most of us who have looked at life with open eyes must have seen!

It is almost invariably the most gallant barks that fall to pieces in this way. They go out so bravely! with such a gay disregard of danger, and the first rock they strike upon bruises them

just sufficiently to admit of the waters of bitterness welling in, and then they fill with fell rapidity, and go to the bottom.

The barks that rigour, and routine, and respectability—all these such good things in their way—have wrecked! How many "hopes of the family" have been court-martialed out of all care for the future for some ward-room joke or mess-table excess that rigour would not, or routine dared not overlook. The boyish escapade may be no very dark thing in itself: just a vinous defiance of a superior officer; just a bacchanalian boast; just a few idle words said out of the lavishness of high spirits; nothing very desperate, nothing very dark, but sufficient, very often, God knows, to cause a man to be given over to all manner of devilries and despair, by reason of the crushing punishment it calls forth. Take from a man all hope in his career, or, as is frequently done, dismiss him from it with disgrace, and he is in the position of a woman whose fair fame has been dimmed. All is over for him in this world, however it may be in the next. We should deal very gently with the erring, they deal so hardly with themselves.

Those, and those alone, who have known a man who is under a cloud in the flesh, as well as in books; who have seen the one who went from his home a star, return to it a fallen one; who have marked a father grow stern to a favourite son, because that son and a profession that was as dear to him as a son had parted ignominiously; who have witnessed the agony of late repentance in the severely punished man; the shrinking from former friends; the withdrawal of former friends from him; the gloomy turning away from those who show affection for him still, and who wound him by showing it pityingly; the morose doubts as to that justice and mercy which have not been extended to himself, existing at all; those who have sorrowed for the blackness that is his sole portion now, for whom all had been brightness formerly; those and those alone will understand this chapter and the feelings which dictate it.

Stanley Villars had not been wrecked by rigour, or routine, or respectability. On the contrary, his ruin had been wrought by his own hand entirely. He owed his destruction to no stingingly sharp, horribly public reprimand; to no over severity; to no official animus. He had

"gone to the bad," as Claude Walsingham called it, simply because he had not been able to brook disappointment, and the downfall of all those mere tender hopes which made up, despite his outward sternness, a larger portion of his than most men's lives. Love was to him more than it is to most men; he was chary of it, he gave it with hesitation. When it got rudely treated, and thrown back to him as a thing of no worth, there seemed to be nothing left to him. So he suffered himself to drift into unseemly paths, and took no heed as to what he did with himself.

He did all things that he was compelled to do, or was led into doing, without the smallest particle of heart, the smallest atom of interest, the smallest semblance of feeling. He wrote carelessly, not with the carelessness of joyousness, and thoughtlessness, but with the carelessness of black, dogged indifference; and that he did so was marked, and marked to his detriment. He married lovelessly, and quickly came to feel that his wife's lot was as black and hard and arid as his own—a sorrowful conclusion for a sensitive man to arrive at. He ceased to take an interest in all that he had hitherto been interested in; and

when he had done so, and found that all ceased to take an interest in him, as was natural, the stultifying sense of utter stagnation came down and utterly crushed him. Worst of all, he felt himself to be an erring man, and also felt that the time for retracing his steps, for redeeming his error, was gone by. There was no opportunity for amending, for death was staring him in the face. For it was quite true, that statement which Claude Walsingham had declared to be but "an ingenious fabrication of that girl's." Stanley Villars had broken a blood-vessel, and there was now upon his brow the pallor of fast-approaching dissolution. He looked such a haggard, pallid man, that the stranger turned to look upon him as he passed along the street, and the casual acquaintance passed by on the other side, because life is too short and too brisk in London to admit of any dallying on the road.

Two or three men whom he knew well, who had been employed with him on the same journal, who had thought rather good things of him when he came among them first, met him this day, and looked upon him with the eyes of men whose judgment he had disappointed, and whose

verdict he had made faulty. They told him "distinctly," as they afterwards said, that "if he didn't put a stop to this sort of thing, and go away somewhere for a rest, he'd be sorry for it." He thanked them for their advice, and said, "he'd think about it," as he did, truth to tell, somewhat bitterly.

You see he had no very intimate associates among these men. The majority, though running a career of work equally hard, and of dissipation far harder than his own, were running it unencumbered. They had had the wit not to hamper themselves with wives without money. If they lived in dingy lodgings, they dined at good clubs, and it was at their clubs that other men saw them. Moreover, it was very few of them who did live in dingy lodgings, and these only the youngest and most unassuming of the band. The older men had neat little sets of chambers, and some of them possessed a fine taste in books and pictures, and engraved glass, which they gratified. The most of them, too, dressed well, and in consequence, fought shy of a man whose new clothes were worse than his old threadbare ones, in that they were so execrably cut.

Had he been "alone in his hole," as they said, there were many who would have sought him out and striven to urge him forward, with hand and voice, ay, and pen too. But it was not congenial to them to go and sit in a dull room, with a downcast man and a little girl who had nothing in common with them—who was "left behind" invariably, when they did try to talk to her. Bad as such a position was, a lady would have been better placed in it; that is to say, she would have made it better to his friends, and through them to her husband. It was not the fault of his fellow-labourers that he slipped away from them entirely, save just when they chanced to meet him at the office. The man whose home will not stand inspection must do this eventually, no matter how warm the original feeling towards him. He was careworn, downcast, and badly dressed! With the best intentions in the world, other men could not invite him to make these facts more public still, by "joining them anywhere."

Bligh, the man who had taken his work for him, held on to him with the resolute staunchness of youth and strength; also with the tenacity which comes of having a certain amount of spare

time in which to display such tenaciousness. Bligh went to him daily, writing what he couldn't write, and revising what he wrote, and bidding him cheer up, with an earnest hopefulness of better things being in store for Stanley, which proved that he was looking upon the spectacle of a boat going down for the first time. Went to him daily, feeling the whole time that Stanley's wife was not quite sure of what her manner should have been to him, she being palpably in doubt as to whether he was really a friend or only a portion of the printing machine with which Stanley had to do, in a way that was likewise not quite clear to her.

This day, however, on which he had gone out, leaving Marian crying in the passage, he had not met with Bligh. He had only fallen in with those men who tendered him advice which was admirable, but difficult to act upon under existing circumstance; it was not upon the cards that he should "cut work for a time and go to the seaside," which was what his advisers recommended, in the liberal manner in which people are wont to recommend pleasant extravagancies to their impoverished friends.

He had come to the stage of pitying himself profoundly before this juncture, of pitying himself almost as if he were another man; he could stand aside, as it were, in his cooler moments, and watch the creature he had become, and feel sure of what the end would be, almost as clearly as the most circumspect among his acquaintances could have done. He knew that his bark was stove in and rapidly filling; and he felt a pity for that it was so. But he never thought of attempting to bale out the water that was swamping him. He was wrecked, and it seemed to him too late to avoid going down.

I do not think, after all, that the sight of Bella the day before, in all the bravery of her beauty, and with her beauty set off by all those little toilet elegancies which money alone can deck a woman in, no matter how good her taste may be,—I do not think that the sight of Bella had been good for him. It was like the spirit of the past he had known, coming to mock him in his present dark poverty. There was about her such refinement, brightness, beauty, and wealth; and all these things were gone from his life.

The meagreness of the room, the meanness of

his own and his wife's habiliments, the miserable lack of all that was graceful and refined in their surroundings, the poverty and barrenness, the arid nature of the soil on which he was stranded for ever, had never struck him so vividly before. He thought bitterly of the contrast between now and then—very, very bitterly of it!

He had drifted away into this dismal swamp, this slough of despond, and no man had put out a hand to hold him back. They had, one and all, let him drift. Had he been wealthy, or at any rate independent, his gloomy despair would have rendered him interesting perhaps, and society might have set itself the pleasing task of comforting him—taking him to its bosom as it has taken other "stricken deer," however mad, bad, and dangerous to know, they have been. But he was not wealthy, or even independent, and gloomy despair in a poor man is a bore in a drawing-room. He had no club of his own, and he was not convivial enough to be carried away perforce by other men to expensive little club dinners which he could never return. He was a literary man, out at elbows, in a barefaced, pinched, despicable way, and, as such, was no credit to the fraternity.

Consequently, without meaning it exactly—wishing him well, but being unable to serve him—the fraternity felt that the whirl of London life was separating him from them, carrying him out of their orbit, and didn't precisely see why, and how, and where!

It was no one's fault, but he was a very friendless man. The knowledge that he had a poor, patient little wife at home had kept him at first from accepting invitations to enter into that masculine society which all men need, and which would have braced him up. This knowledge kept him from accepting their invitations at first; and by-and-by the same knowledge kept the men from inviting him. It was no one's fault, but he was a very friendless man. The full knowledge that he was so, the full horror of being so, had seized upon him after Bella left that day. He had endeavoured to dispel it by that course of drinking and writing and smoking which Marian had recounted to Mrs. Claude Walsingham. He had failed in his endeavour, and broken a blood-vessel into the bargain, and then he had risen up, swearing that he "would not lie there and die like a dog!"

The yearning to see his family again—his

brother and sisters, especially Florence—came upon him as he went along the streets alone. It was hard, very hard, that the gulf which he had created between them and himself, in his first rash wrath, should be between them till the end. The end! yes, it was coming. Men in his state did not live long he knew, when the strain that reduced them to such a state was kept up. He was told off for death surely enough. It was hard, very hard, to think that those who had been little children with him but the other day as it seemed, he was still so young, should go on their way rejoicing, indifferent to or unconscious of the fiat that had gone forth.

They were his brother and his sister still. Such a little thing would bring them together again for the short time that was left to him—such a little thing would do it, if only the opportunity were given. The days were not so very long past in which Gerald had looked up to him, and his sisters had relied upon him beyond all others, and even Carrie herself had given in to his decree.

Those days were not so long past in reality, but they were a long way off in seeming, as he turned round the corner of the square and came in sight

of Gerald's house. He had wandered on and on, never intending to go so far, never owning to himself that it was towards Gerald's house that his steps were tending. When he found himself close upon it he started, and stopped! and his heart began to thump ominously, and the dew to gather on his brow. They were "so near, and yet so far." It would have been such a little thing to have gone forward and lifted the knocker that he had lifted a thousand times before, in the days when he was a son of that house, and as free to pass its threshold as Gerald himself. It would have been such a little thing! But he did not do it. He thought of the stare the man who opened the door would give; he thought of the signs of decay that were about him; he thought of how they all—even Florence—had let him go; and as he thought of these things, he told himself that the time "was gone by." And yet he was dying! and the desire in his heart to see them once more was such a big one!

While he was standing there, too weak to go on, too weak to go back, too weak to conquer his desire or give way to it, a carriage drew up at the door of the house at which he stood gazing, and

with a dreamy wonder he recognised in the occupants of it Bella Vane and the baby-faced beauty. Then he remembered that Bella Vane was Mrs. Claude Walsingham, and that the baby-faced beauty was his wife. And then he saw it all! His wife had been brought there to seek for him or to sue for him! He leant against the corner shuddering. It was too late to interfere. That which he had shrank from doing was being done for him, and he was conscious of a sick wild hope that it might end well—that his wife would win admission for herself and re-admission for him, and that they would see and forgive and love him at the last. You see his pride was pretty well broken, poor fellow! He was, in truth, humbled and softened in a way that it is very sad to see.

It has already been told how that visit ended. By-and-by he saw Bella come out again and enter her carriage; and as he saw the expression of the women's faces as they drove past him (for he never thought of attempting to hide himself), he saw that it was all over—that his sick, wild hope had been born to perish. Then he turned himself away resolutely, thinking, as we are apt to think when we only see one side of the shield,

that "his own" had been more bitter and harder to him than was the case in reality. As he so thought, he swore a solemn oath never to hold communion with one of them again. They "had cast him off utterly, evidently; repudiated his wife, perhaps; made him a by-word, a thing of scorn, in the eyes and mouths of their blackguard flunkies! Come what would now, he would never nurse a soft thought of one of them again." Those of whom he thought and muttered had been little children with him, and had at the same mother's knees lisped their little prayers!

There can be no worse hell than was in this man's heart as he walked away. Whatever his faults had been, whatever his sin had been, he was being punished for it in the flesh in a way that must have purified his spirit; he was having it here in a way that entitled him to the brightest hereafter. How horrible it is, that the actions of others, erring, weak, and faulty as himself, can make a human being so hopelessly wretched.

He did not go straight home. Miserable as he was himself, he shrank from seeing the misery and disappointment that he fancied would be upon the pretty face of the poor little log he had tied to

him. She was not very deep, still he did not fathom her. He knew no more of what she was capable when put to the test, than a man can know of the woman he does not love. He went to a house in the Strand, and smoked and drank brandy till the pain within him was dulled a trifle. Then, as the shadows grew long, and the house began to fill with men, the majority of whom seemed unpleasantly happy and well-pleased with life, he got himself away out into the street once more, where he was seen by Claude, who shrank out of his way quickly, as a thing who staggered in the daylight, and was otherwise disreputable.

Stanley had marked little this day save that door which was barred to him, and the occupant of the carriage that had waited at it; but he marked his old friend now, and his old friend's avoidance of him. He had borne a good deal, but this was the last drop in the cup. He turned away down one of those little streets that lead to the river.

CHAPTER XLVII.

FOUND OUT.

Before Mrs. Markham went down to dinner on the day of her arrival at her brother's house, she made a progress into Mrs. Claude's dressing-room, expecting to find her sister-in-law there. But her sister-in-law was not there; accordingly Mrs. Markham looked round the room in order to see what additions had been made to its decorations since she last saw it.

She found out one or two new ornaments, and disapproved of them, as became a woman who had no taste for such things herself, and no indulgence for those who had, and gratified it. "Absurdly he indulges her, to be sure," she thought severely, as though every one of the frivolities she censured had been wrung from the sweat of Claude's brow. Then she saw something

else—a letter lying in the corner—and pounced upon it in all honour, not intending for an instant to read it, but meaning to deliver it up to Bella with a reprimand for being "so careless."

She did not intend for an instant to read it; but as soon as she got it into her hand she saw that it was that letter which Claude had found awaiting him on his return—that special letter which he had given her to read. "I see how it is," she thought; "she's explained everything, and there's been a reconciliation. Thank God!"

She meant this thoroughly. Hard and stern as she was, she was also just, and her soul recoiled from the means that had been used to bring Bella to justice. She was very glad that those means had failed—very glad indeed—though she was still ready and willing to swoop down upon any of her sister-in-law's shortcomings in fair fight.

She put the letter away in her pocket, meaning to return it to Bella with a reprimand, as I said before, on the first fitting opportunity. Then she walked grimly down-stairs, revolving many things in her mind; amongst others, whether "Jay" or "Marshall and Snelgrove" should execute the large order she had to give on the morrow.

Mrs. Markham was, as I have said, a very just woman. When she came down and found that all was fair and smooth between the husband and wife, she felt that Bella must have explained very satisfactorily all that had not looked well, and that therefore it behoved her, Claude's sister, to say something apologetic about her manner previously. She felt that it would only be just to Bella to say this, and she would be just though she could not be gracious.

Now Mrs. Markham's justice was a harder thing to bear than most women's injustice would have been. It was so very hard, that even when it commended, you thought more of how it would be down upon you did it ever catch you tripping, than of its present commendation. There was a certain wintry brightness in her manner to Bella during dinner which was not pleasant, but which said plainly that Bella was not so bad as she (Mrs. Markham) had imagined, and that she was glad of it.

Mrs. Markham had resolved upon not saying her say, upon not speaking her words of justice, until they should all have re-assembled in the drawing-room after dinner. Her manner, how-

ever, made manifest to Bella that some such recantation of error was looming, and Bella forthwith tried to strengthen herself for the reception of one of the most unpleasant things in the world —a grim apology.

"I wish she'd drop it, but I see she won't," Bella thought, as she was walking up-stairs behind her sister-in-law after dinner. "I wish I'd made Claude come up with us; this eternal talkee talkee is tedious!" she mentally added, as she thought of what Mrs. Markham would say, and what she would have to say in return, and what Mrs. Markham would then reply, occurred to her.

She was spared the infliction yet awhile. "I shall go to my own room till Claude comes up, and you have tea, Bella," Mrs. Markham said, when they reached the top of the stairs. "I'm by no means sure that that list is complete, and as we've no time to lose, I'll just look over it again."

"Very well," Bella replied; "as you like, Ellen. I will help you to-morrow, of course; we shall only have the morning, remember. Claude means to take us off by the 3.40 train."

"Quite right too; we ought to get back to my poor mother as speedily as possible," Mrs. Markham replied, as grimly as if Bella were responsible for the desolation that had come upon Mrs. Wilkinham. With that they separated. Mrs. Markham [illegible] to her own room, and Bella [illegible] Harper into the drawing-room.

[illegible] had been civil, scrupulously civil, to Miss Harper, but she had felt very savage with the [illegible] over that explanation with Claude. "What right has she—what right has any [illegible] speak about me, to censure me, by [illegible] to my husband?" Bella [illegible] forgive Claude, dear Claude, [illegible] but I'll never forgive her [illegible]."

[illegible] when they found themselves [illegible] themselves uncomfortably [illegible] was not the sort of woman to [illegible] and conceal it. While [illegible] she would treat her [illegible] in her manner which [illegible] never be Mrs. [illegible]

[illegible] as sure as she

found herself alone with Mrs. Claude. She had kept them damp during the whole day, and Mrs. Markham had been considerably touched thereby. The latter was not one of the weeping order of womankind herself, but the two tears which Grace had established as soon as she heard the tidings of Mr. Walsingham's death, had been accepted rather above their due worth as a just and proper tribute, by Mr. Walsingham's daughter. Miss Grace perceived this, and as her grief was not a disfiguring thing, she kept up the soft semblance, and gratified Mrs. Markham.

But now that she was alone with Bella, the tears were abolished at once. She felt that Bella saw through her. For this she cared little as matters were going; but she would not give Mrs. Claude Walsingham the satisfaction of seeing a transparent deception practised without an end or aim. So she dried her eyes, and subsided (it being after dinner, and she feeling a little sleepy) into tearless composure on a couch.

"She shall not infest 'the Court' when I'm the mistress of it," Bella thought, as she glanced towards her calm guest; "if my being cool to her huffs the Markham I can't help it. She must

be huffed, for I won't have that girl about my house any more."

The evening was warm, quiet, conducive to thought, and Mrs. Claude Walsingham had much to think about, even though she would not permit her mind to dwell upon the Stanley Villarses. The whole plan of her life would be altered by Mr. Walsingham's death. Claude would, of course, have to go down and take up his part of big man in the county. Henceforth all her interests would centre in that neighbourhood which had seemed so dull to her when she was in it as a guest. She had no fears, however, of its seeming dull to her in future; the pleasure of possession was upon her already. She would be the queen of that little world; she would no longer be the jealously watched wife of the heir-apparent merely.

She would not permit her mind to dwell upon the Stanley Villarses any more, and this not out of heartless forgetfulness, but because she had promised her husband not to go near them again, and she felt that it was upon the cards that she might break her promise did she think about them. The hope that she might be permitted to

alleviate, in a measure, in the present, the woe of which she had been the cause in the past, was dead. The only thing left to her was to bury it, and all appertaining to it, as speedily as possible, —to bury it entirely out of sight, and so fulfil, to the utmost, the compact she had made with her husband.

Love had thoroughly tamed her. She did not rebel, even in her innermost heart, against this decree of Claude's, to cease from all communion with the man they had both aided in blighting. Claude willed it, and that was enough for her. Like Tennyson's May Queen, she "had been wild and wayward; but she was not wayward now."

It was late in the evening before Claude and his sister came in to tea. When they did come, they came together—a fact that requires a brief explanation.

Mrs. Markham had gone back to her bedroom, to look over the list of articles required for the mourning, in which the whole establishment down at the Court had to be placed. After doing this, and jotting a few after-thoughts, in the way of handkerchiefs with broad hems, &c., she went over to the couch Grace had occupied during the

greater portion of the day, and pensively placed herself upon it.

Then she, too, fell to thinking about the same subject that Bella was dwelling upon below—viz., the difference that her father's death would make in life at the Court. Mrs. Markham did not like Bella, therefore she adjudged her capable of actions that were iniquitous in her eyes. "I shouldn't wonder if she gets Claude to turn his mother out, and, after all, won't care to live there much herself," she thought, which, considering that she had warmly protested against the aged Mrs. Markham dwelling in the same tent with herself on the occasion of her own nuptials, was a little inconsistent. But then, people whose important actions are always marked by a perfect propriety, may be granted the liberty of being inconsistent about such trifling matters as their fellow-creatures, and the motives that rule the same.

"I wish they would have tea at a decent hour in this house," Mrs. Markham said to herself, petulantly, after about an hour had elapsed, and no summons had come to her from the region where the tea was to be consumed. "What must

Grace Harper think of the management here? Everything so shockingly irregular!"

She turned round impatiently as she thought this. It had been very unpleasant to her that Grace Harper, than whom she firmly believed there was not a better regulated young woman in civilisation—it had been very unpleasant to her that Grace Harper should have been cognisant of the fact of misunderstandings having arisen between Claude and his wife. The mischief was done, however, and nothing was left but to pray that Bella, the erring, might deport herself for the future with becoming solemnity, and so erase from Miss Harper's mind the impression former levity had made on it.

As the thought of the various irregularities of the house struck her, she turned round impatiently, and her eye lighted on an envelope that had fallen down between the cushion and the head of the couch. In a moment, her hand was upon it. It was addressed to Miss Harper, and it contained no letter, therefore she turned it round idly.

Turned it round idly, with the half design of looking at the monogram or seal, and then started up erect, with an exclamation of "Good heavens!"

and commenced rapidly searching in her own pocket for the letter she had found in Bella's dressing-room, for the inside of the envelope, that evidently belonged to Miss Harper, was covered with duplicate words in duplicate handwriting to those which the anonymous epistle had contained.

She saw it all in an instant—saw the whole of the perfidy and the treachery that had been planned and partly carried out. She did not like her brother's wife, and she knew that her brother's wife did not like her. But for all that, the perfidy was very painful, and the treachery very terrible to her, of which it had been intended that Bella should be the victim.

She kept the two—the envelope that had been practised upon, and the letter, the result of that diabolical practise—in her hands for some few minutes, comparing them, and deciding "what she ought to do next." She was a very just woman, and she knew that obnoxious as anything like an open detection, and the bringing to justice of the offender, would be, that it behoved her to put her brother on guard against the real enemy, and to say to her brother's wife, "We have all wronged you."

But it would be hard, very hard, to do this. They—her mother and herself—had a little to answer for in the matter, for they had both not only taught Grace in the old days to regard Claude as specially her own, but they had also suffered her to feel when Claude married that they regarded Bella as her special foe. They had been to blame in the matter; but then, "Who could have supposed her such a serpent?" Mrs. Markham said to herself, angrily.

I think Mrs. Markham hated her smooth-surfaced, well-ordered young friend in that hour of detection, debate, and uncertainty. "When she finds I know it, she ought to be ashamed to look one of the family in the face again," she thought. "However she'll dare to show herself in society, or take the sacrament, I can't think!" and Mrs. Markham shuddered.

But though she shuddered, and felt that much shame would be upon her old friend and favourite, did she not hold her peace, Mrs. Markham never dreamt of holding it. She was a just woman, essentially a just woman, and though she would have no sensation scene, no idle conversation on the subject, there was something to be

done, and something to be said, in justice to Claude's wife.

She went out of her room, and down the stairs, with the envelope and letter gathered together closely in one hand, looking as hard, firm, and cold as usual. But she was not hard and cold now, however firm she might be. She was thinking rather softly of the girl whom she didn't like, and who might have been wrecked by the girl she had liked till now.

She found her brother looking at the evening papers, and smoking a cigar. It had pleased him to remain longer by himself than was usual with him this night. He, too, had had much to think about. Despite all those hard things, he had said about Stanley Villars the sight of his old friend staggering in the Strand had been a cruel one to him.

Mrs. Markham came in with no idle apologies for interrupting him. She had something to say; she had no scruples about the manner of saying it.

"I think you know that I don't like your wife, Claude," she began; to which Claude replied—

"I think you might select some one to impart that fact to who'd care a damn for it—*I* don't!"

"Hush!" she said, as though he had been a small boy still. "I was going to say that though I don't like her, I owe her some reparation—and so do you, for she has been very badly treated!"

He looked up from his paper, and asked, quickly, "By whom?"

"By all of us! Just look here!" and then she unfolded the letter and the envelope, and handed them to Claude, who said, "Pooh!" and could make nothing fresh of the combination.

"But, Claude," she expostulated, "you must!"

"Oh, botheration! What's the good of it?—that's all done with now! Bella has told me the truth, and explained away the malice, and there's nothing more to be said."

"But there is this much more to be said, Claude—the malice comes from a quarter where we least expected to find it."

"Answer for yourself! I expect to find malice in every quarter!"

Mrs. Markham moved her shoulders, and passed over the cynical remark. She was as cynical as her brother in her heart, but she put her cynicism on another score—as is the habit of professing Christians!

"There is this much more to be said about this, Claude—I am very much afraid that your wife has been very much wronged!"

"Why to God do you harp on that?" he asked. "She told me how it came about, and I'm quite satisfied. What more do you want?"

"I want to tell you that I'm very sorry for my share in the business."

"Your share in the business has been small enough, as far as I can see," Claude replied. He felt some of the younger brother sensations come over him as Mrs. Markham denounced herself.

"My share in the business has been, that I have made the writer of that letter my friend," she said—"that I've believed in her, and—come, I will out with it all now—allowed her to see that I thought less of Bella than I had any right to do. Bella has told you the truth, and you are satisfied; but that doesn't do away with the obligation that is on me to tell you that I have found out that it's Grace Harper who put the *truth* before you first in an unpleasant way—and—and—I'm disgusted with her!"

"Grace Harper!—the devil it is!" he said; and then he began to look at the letter and

envelope. "What reason could *she* have for trying on that little game?" he asked, after a minute or two; and then he looked curiously at his sister, and his sister looked curiously at him.

"Never mind her motive—the way she has acted is plain enough. Claude, I'm sorry and ashamed that I should ever have thought her fit to hold a candle to Bella—she is not!"

"I always knew that," he replied, briefly.

"Whatever Bella's faults may be," Mrs. Markham went on—for even now she could not forget that Bella had faults—"whatever Bella's faults may be, she's neither cowardly, mean, nor sly. She doesn't like me, but I will say that for her."

"She likes you as well as you like her," Claude replied. "As for Miss Grace and her small attempts to part us, you may as well give her to understand that my wife is dearer to me than ever. The devil might whisper to me now about her, and I should turn a deaf ear!"

He said this very warmly. He knew how the hearing it would sting Grace Harper, and he desired nothing so much as that Grace Harper should be stung.

Mrs. Markham bowed her head. "After what

I have told you, Claude, it will be better that Grace should go down with me alone, I think. Bella and you can follow—say the day after to-morrow. I shall say nothing till we get back to the Court, but I don't suppose your wife will care to keep Miss Harper's name on her visiting list."

"I suppose not," he replied—"that is, if you tell her."

With all his hot love for his wife, his sister was not only juster, but more generous, to Bella in that moment.

"She could not, after what has transpired," Mrs. Markham said—"she *could not*, Claude; there shall be no fuss, if you fear that. I can't forget that the families have been friendly for years before either of us were born—I can't forget," she continued, waxing a little warmer, "that I once hoped to see them united; but above all, I can't forget that Grace is not worthy to touch your wife's hand!"

"I don't think that she is myself," Claude replied. "It was devilish mean, and no mistake! but you women are queer animals when you get a jealous fit on!" By the light of which speech

Mrs. Markham read that her brother was more lenient to Miss Grace's perfidy than she (Mrs. Markham) herself; more lenient also than he would have been, had that perfidy not been the offspring of an unhealthy passion for himself. He detested and despised Miss Harper; but he remembered, through all that detestation and contempt, that Grace Harper loved him. A woman never forgives and never likes a man who acts meanly and basely, even for love of her, to the man she loves; but a man placed in similar circumstances with relation to a brace of women feels differently, and is more merciful. He forgets the base meanness, remembers the love alone, and is lenient. In fact, he is a little more selfish and a little nobler than a woman can possibly be.

"We won't talk about what her reason might have been for having acted as she has acted, Claude. All I say is, that she shall never be thrust upon your wife again through me," Mrs. Markham replied.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A HUSBAND'S FIRST GIFT.

FLORENCE was married! She was Mrs. Chester now; and that proud destiny being achieved, far more toleration was shown to her weakness respecting Stanley than had been shown formerly. More toleration was shown to her weakness; but for all that Lady Villars took an early opportunity of suggesting to the happy bridegroom that he kept a tight hand on his bride in the matter, and made no rash promises under the influence of pardonable emotion.

The toleration that was shown to Florence was shown in this way. When Mrs. Chester went up to change her wedding dress for a travelling one, Carrie accompanied her out of the fulness of sisterly affection. Carrie was uncommonly well pleased with her own share in this business which had come to a climax to-day. There had been no

forcing of a girl's inclination in the matter, she told herself and Gerald; she had only trained and pruned Florry's affections in a suitable direction, and taught Florry the tractable to feel that there was sin in suffering the thought of "what might have been" with Claude Walsingham to stand in the way of a very good thing.

Florry was loving, gentle, womanly, and good; she was also much given to seeing the things that were shown to her. Now, some women, equally well-endowed with her in other respects, are not blessed with that safest gift for their sex of seeing selected sights, and finding them good. But Florence having found brambles and stumbling-blocks in the path she had elected to follow of her own accord, when starting in life—having been sorely torn and bruised thereby—came back repentant, and ready to be guided by Carrie for the future.

It must be confessed that Carrie guided her well, all things considered. Lady Villars was well acquainted with the materials which Fate placed in her plump hands to mould according to her will. The path to the entrance of which she led Florry, and along which she gave Florry a gentle impetus

when the ground seemed heavy, was an open, moderately pleasant, thoroughly safe one. It was the best, perhaps, that Florry could have travelled, after having "made tracks" in the wrong direction formerly. It was moderately pleasant and thoroughly safe, and the man who was to be her companion along it was as lovable, in his love for her and pride in her, as any man could have been coming after Claude.

"You have made me so happy, dear!" Lady Villars said, giving Florry a discreet little hug that expressed affection for the bride, and consideration for the bride's veil. "You have made me so happy, dear! and you look *so* nice!"

"I am glad of that, Carrie: you've been so kind to me."

In her natural emotion at the thought of the quickly coming parting, Florence remembered nothing but the kind, sweet little speeches Lady Villars had been in the habit of making at divers times to her. She forgot the hard meaning those speeches had sometimes hidden. So she said now, "you've been so kind to me," with a certain sudden swelling and reddening of the eye-lids that betokened the approach of rain.

"And you've made Gerald very happy too, my darling," Lady Villars continued. "Oh! gracious! *how* tight that dress is round the waist! You've made Gerald so happy!"

"Dear Gerald!" Florence replied, hurriedly; "he's always so good! But then he has so much to make him happy! Now, there's dear Stanley—if—he—could—only——" She stopped, for the rain had come.

"Don't, *don't* cry, dear!" Lady Villars said, soothingly; "it's very natural for you to feel so, though, very natural indeed. Who could have believed that Stanley would ever have so heartlessly lost sight of us all?"

"Oh, Carrie! you don't know Stanley!"

"You must remember you are a married woman now, dear," Lady Villars resumed, patronisingly; "you must be very careful not to give way to any false sentimentality, not alone on your own account, but on Mr. Chester's. You will be more on your guard though, I'm sure, than Mrs. Claude Walsingham is."

"What is she doing?"

"I can't tell you now. What I was going to say is, don't try to work on Fred about Stanley,

because that wouldn't be fair, and he would feel that it wasn't fair. I need not caution you though, dear; your own good heart will preserve you."

As Lady Villars did not state from what Florence's own good heart would preserve her, Florence went down with that sensation of elastic merit which is apt to come over the recipient of sketchy "honourable mentions."

Her good heart was touched to tears of grateful loving joy when she found herself alone in the carriage with her husband at last. He took up a black leather case that was lying by his side, and after handling it in apparent uncertainty for a few moments, he said—

"Flo, my darling, I thought this should be your first present from your husband."

As he spoke, he put a splendidly bound copy of Stanley's novel into her lap, and won his wife to himself entirely, and for ever.

It was no stroke of genius, it was no subtle plan, it was no pre-arranged sensational effect. It was simply a bit of pure good feeling for the girl he loved, designed to show her that he was not utterly regardless of her feelings at not having been suffered to ask her pet brother to her mar-

riage. As such, it was accepted: as such, it was repaid.

It may easily be imagined how Florence leant upon his shoulder and cried then copiously, thanking him for what he had done, and, like a woman, asking him to do more. That entreaty of Carrie's that Fred might not be worked upon was utterly disregarded now; and Fred showed himself to be very ready to be worked upon, rather to like it, in fact.

"He shall be a great deal with us as soon as ever we come back—shan't he, Fred?"

"Rather! I should think so!" Mr. Chester replied. Then there came an interruption; they were compelled to get out at the terminus; but as soon as they were seated in the railway carriage, and the train was moving on, the conversation was resumed.

"I don't want you to think either Gerald or Carrie unkind to him *at all*, Fred, but Carrie has prejudices; she is very good herself, and she has no patience with other people who are not equally good."

Mr. Chester looked rather keenly for him at his wife.

"What prejudiced her against Stanley in the first place, Flo?"

"I don't know; she'll get over it. You dear boy" (taking up her books with effusion), "I'm so happy."

There was nothing more said about any person not present for a time; the brother was forgotten in the book, and the happiness the gift of the book had greatly enhanced. But at last Mr. Chester said, with an amount of decision he was almost surprised at himself for displaying—

"And, Flo, dear, give Lady Villars to understand clearly that you're mistress in your own house. I'll have no interference."

"She will never try to interfere, I think," Florence replied.

"That's right; but let her see from the first that you're mistress in you're own house, Flo—it will save trouble."

We are seeing the last of Florence now. She has started on the journey of life fairly enough. Her life looked bright before her on that wedding morning—all the brighter that the prospect was hers of making Stanley's life happier on her return from the inevitable tour she was about to

take. Her life looked bright before her; and bright it will probably be. She was not one to indulge in vain regrets for having declined on "a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart" than she had thought to rest upon once. The feelings were warm towards her, and the heart was broad enough to hold her well, and to honour her highly. She will be a happy woman, and when she looks upon her children, the very memory will be dead within her that she ever loved another than their father.

When Mrs. Markham had talked over the subject of that letter, and the cause of it, and the writer of it, with her brother, she came to the conclusion that it would be better to keep silence as to her discovery, both to Bella and Grace Harper, till the latter was back with her own people.

"She shall travel back with me," Mrs. Markham said to Claude; "you and Bella can follow."

"Very well," he replied.

"When I get down there I shall give her to understand that I have found her out, the mean, malicious monkey! and that she had better never attempt to show her face at the Court. I shal

not say a word to Bella while Miss Harper is her guest; but it will only be fair to Bella to suffer Miss Harper to be her guest as short a time as possible."

"As you like, Ellen. There's no harm done, though, remember; so hold your punishing hand; don't make it too heavy." Claude could not be quite oblivious that the wrong had been wrought for love of him. He was scarcely the man to have sent Stanley Villars to destruction for, after all.

"It can't be made too heavy. The base wickedness of the girl we all thought so good frightens me."

"There's no harm done, as I said before," Claude replied. "Mine was the worst fault after all. I was a fool to pay the slightest attention to what any one said of a woman I know as well as I do Bella. She deserved better of me."

"She deserved better of us all," Mrs. Markham replied. She did not like her sister-in-law, nevertheless she would be just. Bella had deserved better of them all. Mrs. Markham would be the first to acknowledge it.

"She deserved better of us all, Claude," she said emphatically.

"Well, render her the 'better' now—it's not too late. As I said before, there's no harm done," Claude replied, rising up. "Come," he continued, "having settled that business, let us go in and see if Bella has a cup of tea for us."

So it came to pass that they walked into the drawing-room together, rather to Bella's amazement.

The evening passed rather heavily. Claude talked to his wife for a short time—talked to her in a lover-like, devotional way, that is very delightful to a woman; but he got tired of talking to her in this way, long, long before she got tired of listening to him; and then he went to sleep over a *Quarterly Review* in a fat arm-chair, and the evening commenced being very dreary.

How could the evening pass other than heavily indeed? Claude was asleep. Bella aggrieved. Mrs. Markham engaged in uprooting one of the traditions of her youth, which was, that a being whom she had elected to honour, and who belonged, moreover, to one of the county families, couldn't err. And Miss Grace Harper was uneasy in a semi-conscious manner, having a conviction that she had been found out, and not

being sure by whom she had been so. The evening passed heavily, very heavily indeed. They were all glad when Claude roused himself from the depths of the fat chair and exclaimed, "By Jove! how late it is, Bella! Had you any idea of it?"

He drew his wife's hand down on to the arm of the fat chair as he spoke, and patted it, looking into her face the while, as he had been wont to look when he was "Major Walsingham" to her, and she only "Bella Vane." And Grace Harper saw that he did this, and felt that after all there were some things that might as well have been left undone, as this was the end of it.

The two ladies, Mrs. Markham and Miss Harper, journeyed down together to the Court on the following day, leaving Claude and his wife to follow. The widowed Mrs. Walsingham met her old favourite with a warmth of affection that it rather grated on Mrs. Markham's nerves to witness, and that contrasted harshly with the tone in which the mother said—

"So my son's wife has not thought fit to come to me in my trouble. Ah, well! I might have expected it."

"Claude and his wife will be here to-morrow, mamma."

"Claude *at least* might have escorted Grace and you, I think."

"And left his wife to follow by herself? No, indeed; Claude values Bella too highly to neglect her in such a way," Mrs. Markham replied, decisively.

"My dear child, *you* will stay with me to-night, will you not?" Mrs. Walsingham asked of Grace —"your dear mother will spare you to me to-night?"

"I have no doubt that her dear mother would do so," Mrs. Markham interposed; "but I believe it is arranged that Grace goes home to-night."

"That arrangement might be broken through," Mrs. Walsingham said; and then Mrs. Markham spoke rather sternly, and Grace Harper knew that her days of favour at the Court were over.

"That arrangement had better *not* be broken through, mother. Grace will agree with me that it will be well that she should not remain to meet my brother and his wife."

"Oh! I can go home, of course," Grace said, hurriedly. "I really never thought of staying—only dear Mrs. Walsingham seemed to wish me to stay."

Mrs. Walsingham looked from her daughter to her guest. "What is all this?" she asked.

"You had better not ask now, mamma."

"It means that Mrs. Markham—my—own—old friend, has been influenced by your daughter-in-law into conceiving an unfounded dislike to me," Grace exclaimed. "I have known all along that Mrs. Claude Walsingham did not like me, but I never thought she would have been so mean——"

"Perhaps the less said about 'meanness' the better," Mrs. Markham said, in her most commonplace, resolute tones. "I certainly have no desire to make things worse by talking about them; but I think Grace will tell you, mamma," she continued, fixing her eyes steadily on Grace—"I think Grace will tell you, mamma, that she can never be Mrs. Claude Walsingham's guest again; and you must know," she added, quietly, "painful as the knowledge may be to you, that when Mrs. Claude arrives at the Court, it will be as the mistress of it."

Then old Mrs. Walsingham bewailed herself afresh, and in the sadder access of sorrow caused by this reminder which her intensely just daughter

had given her, she suffered the vexed question of Grace's staying or leaving to be settled without further intervention on her part.

Miss Harper recovered her equanimity—her stolidity, rather—very soon. "If the carriage is ready to take me on, I'll go home now. It isn't nice arriving so very late at night, and it will be very late if I stay any longer," she said, after the expiration of a few minutes.

She kissed Mrs. Walsingham, who was still plunged in grief at the thought of her son's wife reigning in her stead, and then she held out a hand that was rather tremulous to Mrs. Markham in farewell.

"I'll see you out into the hall," the latter replied, stalking away to the door in a grim way that told Grace she was to hear the truth at length.

As soon as they reached the hall, Mrs. Markham put her hand on Grace's arm, and sunk her voice to a whisper—

"I never was more shocked and sorry in my life than I was by the finding of that piece of paper," she said, handing the envelope to Grace. "Don't say a word either in deprecation or denial,

for I shouldn't believe you. You will never come here again, of course?"

"I shall never care to come here again," Grace replied, in a very hard tone. "You needn't trouble yourself to put Mrs. Claude on her guard against me," she continued, crumpling up the envelope. "Let us leave each other off without a scene, please."

"It's the last favour I can ever do you—I will."

"You don't mean to be friendly with me, then, any more?"

"No!" Mrs. Markham replied, sharply; "I think you're the basest woman I know: but I'll not betray you to my mother; if you really care about her friendship, you shall not be deprived of it, if you'll promise not to attempt to poison her mind against Claude's wife."

"I don't care about keeping it—you needn't suppose I valued any of you on your own accounts—it was all for Claude!" the girl said, sullenly; then she passed on without another word to the carriage that was awaiting her. Thus ended her connection with the Walsingham family, and with my story.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE END.

When Claude Walsingham and his wife arrived at the Court, Bella found herself very delicately situated. Everything that was to be said to Mrs. Walsingham, Claude told Bella to say. "It was her duty," he said to her, "and therefore she must fulfil it." She was most anxious to fulfil her duty and please her husband, but she did find it rather hard to be compelled to make "what was to be" manifest to Mrs. Walsingham, who would have learnt the lesson much more readily from her son.

After the funeral, Claude said to his wife, "I wish you would get my mother down to the village, Bella, to look over the house; she could point out to you what she would like to have done before she goes to it, better than she could to me."

"Very well, Claude," Bella rejoined; "will you ask her to go?"

"No; it will be much more gracious of you to ask her to go."

"She won't walk, of course?"

"It would do her good—an immense deal of good if she would walk," Claude replied; "dear old lady, she wants rousing!"

"I really think we had better wait till we come back from Scotland, Claude," Bella pleaded. "I'm sure your mother will hate me for hinting a word about the house yet."

"And have the business hanging over our heads the whole time we're away! That's just like a woman—avoid an unpleasantness, at any cost, as long as you can! No, it will be much better to get the thing over. I didn't think you were so weak, Bella, as to shrink from it. I don't."

"Ah! I feel so for her," Bella replied. When she commenced her speech she had intended saying, "Ah! but you don't do it yourself, you put it off upon me." But she waived that intention.

"So do I, dear old mother! but as the thing must be done (for she'd be wretched after a time in a house of which she wasn't both real and

nominal mistress), it had better be done quickly. Find out how she'd like the place furnished, and show yourself interested, there's a dear girl."

Bella promised, and Bella tried to perform; but she merely won wrath to herself during the whole course of the transaction. "It is clearly not my own dear boy who wishes to get rid of me," the widowed mother observed to Mrs. Markham; "it's his wife. She is hurrying me away with the most indecent haste; she has just asked me to go to the village with her, and see if I can't suggest some alterations in the Vale House. I know what that means!"

Of course they knew what it meant. Mrs. Claude knew what it meant herself—namely, that her mother-in-law was to be made as comfortable as possible, and that she (Bella) was to bear the brunt of bringing those comforts into working order. It was horribly unpleasant to her to be regarded as one who was unduly impatient to reign, simply because she obeyed her husband, and strove to make things as pleasant as possible to the one who was dethroned. It was horribly unpleasant; but Bella was wiser in her generation than she had been in the days when we first made

her acquaintance, and she bore the unpleasantness meekly, as being a portion of a young wife's lot—at least, the lot of all young wives whose lives are cast in the vicinity of their husbands' mothers.

Mrs. Walsingham, senior, hated the Vale House vehemently from the moment she looked upon it with the eyes of its future occupant. "I'm confident that I saw a black beetle in the kitchen," she said to Bella, as they were going up-stairs to look at the bed-rooms. "However, the place is good enough for *me!*" She said that the place was good enough for her in a tone that made Bella long to cry out, "And for me too, if I'm only permitted to inhabit it alone; you go back to the Court and be happy." But though she longed to say this with the longing that comes upon one after having been compelled to listen to the plaints of a discontented one for a time, she held her peace, remembering that the Court was not hers to give away magnanimously, and that she would only rule in it herself through the grace of Claude the great.

But she would be sorely harassed before she assumed the robes of queen-regnant, of that she

felt very certain; the sovereign to be deposed was so very sensitive, not to say litigious, and the black beetles were so numerous, and the whole atmosphere of the Vale House so charged with quarrelling matter. "If Claude would only speak out to his mother, and have done with it," Bella thought wearily, when Mrs. Walsingham pointed out the tenth draught, and declared herself for the fortieth time ready and willing to submit to anything, no matter how unendurable—"If Claude would only speak out to his mother and have done with it, instead of making me 'imply,' and 'hint,' and do all sorts of things that she hates me for doing."

But Claude would not speak out. Things were going very well according to his mind. His mother had been given to know that there could not be two queens at the Court, and that it would be well, therefore, that she should take up her abode at the Vale House. To the best of his belief, his mother had acquiesced very calmly and affably in this arrangement. He had heard nothing of the draughts and black beetles. Bella to the best of her ability kept disagreeables, which he could not remedy, from his knowledge.

The day of their departure for the Highlands arrived, and they started, leaving all things in good order. It was clearly understood now that old Mrs. Walsingham should be found installed at the Vale House on their return. "I suppose your wife will not let you stay much at the Court, Claude, with *her* tastes and *her* habits," Mrs. Walsingham observed to her son. "However, though she may not be here much, I'm better out of the way, and I know it."

"That's nonsense, mother," Claude replied. "But what makes you think we shall not be here much? we mean to be here altogether."

"Oh, do you! then I'm very much mistaken, Claude. Those who live longest will see most!"

To which unanswerable argument Claude replied nothing. His mother was in the injured frame of mind, and his experience of women led him to avoid them at such times and in such conditions.

Mrs. Markham, too, had a few words with her brother before he left for Scotland.

"You know, Claude, that though I don't profess much love for Bella, I always do her justice?" she began.

He nodded. "I'm not going to interfere in any feminine squabbles," he said. "If you can't hit it off with Bella, you had better not come in her way, Ellen."

"But I can 'hit it off,' as you call it, with Bella; there is no reason existing why I should *not* hit it off with her—in other words, behave in a very friendly way towards her, as a sister should; but I want to warn you——"

"What the devil about now?"

"Don't let her mix herself up with that man she was engaged to—that Mr. Villars; I don't say that harm would come of it——"

"Well, I should rather hope you don't say so, indeed!"

"No, I don't, Claude; but harm may come of it. I don't like his ideas, and he might graft them upon Bella, eventually. His ideas strike me as being shocking."

"Why?"

Then Mrs. Markham said something about Stanley Villars being "evidently a free-thinker and an atheist," in the vilely inhuman way people are apt to denounce others whose faith they cannot guage, and whose belief is broader, deeper,

nobler than their own, in that it believes in the "good that is in all men," and in the mercy of God towards all his creatures. Mrs. Markham had gathered that Stanley Villars was not travelling along the road to eternity in the same class carriage as herself; therefore, she declared him to be a lost sheep, and settled the question as to his ultimate destination definitely in her own mind, after the manner of bitter Christians.

"That's all nonsense; but I don't fancy Bella will care to see any more of them. She believed him to be dying, or some stuff of the kind; it cured her when I told her I had seen him drunk in the Strand. Good God! how low the fellow's fallen!"

So Claude Walsingham spoke of his old friend, as he strapped one of the rugs that were going with him to Scotland a little tighter. And then he went to see if his wife was ready to start, and presently they were off.

But I must gather the scattered threads of my story together, before I tell you how the Claude Walsinghams enjoyed their trip into Scotland, and what they heard there.

When Stanley Villars turned down that narrow

street that led from the Strand to the river, there was but one thought in his mind, and that one was, "how he should get out of it all most speedily." You see it was "all up" with him (how lightly we use and hear the phrase occasionally, never thinking of its deep, its terrible meaning)—it was "all up" with him. "Was it not pitiful, near a whole city-full, friends he had none!"

Morosely he went along down to a pier, where a river boat was waiting to discharge and take in passengers. There was a band on board the boat, pouring out blithe strains; and he stood and listened, only because he could not go down and drown himself before that gay company. The old habit of courtesy was upon the man still, even in this hour of blackest despair. He could not mar the festivity that appeared to be reigning amongst the crowd on board that boat, by a splash, and a sinking under, by causing that horrible sound, "Man overboard!" to arise.

So he waited there, leaning against the ticket-vendor's shed upon the pier. He was too weak to stand, almost; and as he leant there, fatigue, and the music, and the glare on the water (for

the sun was on it still), made him sleepy, and caused him to shrink from the exertion of drowning himself at once.

"If I could only have a sleep first," he thought. "My God! when did I sleep last?—not for weeks!"

It was true, this, or partially true. He had not entirely forgotten himself and his misery for weeks. The power of sleep was gone from him. He was awfully open-eyed, shockingly conscious of a continual dull pain in the back of the head. Ah! that dull pain, that comes on after many hours' continuous brain-labour! You who know what it is, "make no deep scrutiny into his mutiny," for he had suffered from it long.

By-and-by that boat, with its band, telling how happy it could be in the Strand for evermore with Nancy, passed on, and another bumped against the pier in its stead, shaking him from his resting-place as it bumped, and making him feel that he *must* take a little rest before he could get to the water's edge, and take the final plunge. So he sat down, making a pillow of his arm upon a stout post, that was used to fasten the boats'

ropes to sometimes, and prepared to take the requisite rest.

He was very weak—entirely worn out by grief, despair, and hunger, for he had been fasting, from sheer forgetfulness, the whole day. Soon he slept, lying there, pillowing his head on a rude plank, like the outcast he felt himself to be —he who, but a year ago, had had so bright a fate before him!

The piermen, passing and re-passing him, looked down upon him with the sort of good-natured contempt that is shown to mangy dogs, beggars, and the like.

"He's a rum'un to choose this place of all others for his afternoon nap," one of them said to a comrade. And the comrade replied, "Ay, poor fellow! just heave that sack over him; we'll lay it across him; the river breeze is a sharp'un this evening."

So, there, with an old coal-sack over his shoulders, Stanley Villars lay sleeping, at about the same hour that Claude Walsingham was wringing the promise from Bella to "have no more to do with him."

For at least a couple of hours that sleep of his

lasted. Then a man, in passing from one of the boats to the steps, paused to look at the recumbent form, and with a cry of—

"Good God, Villars! how came you here!" roused him.

"Ah, Bligh! is that you?" Stanley asked, rising up.

"Yes, I have been to Gravesend with a party; they're gone on now, and I must be after them."

"All right!" Stanley replied.

Suddenly, Bligh stopped. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing."

"Why don't you go home, then?" Bligh continued. His party had gone on now, but he did not care for that; he was determined not to lose sight of Stanley until Stanley had rejoined his wife.

"Why don't you go home then?" he said.

"Home! I have none," Stanley replied, thinking only of Gerald's house.

"Nonsense! come along." Then Bligh put his arm through Stanley's, and led him up the

steps, and took him home in a cab, and never left him till poor, crying, frightened Marian was hanging over him, blessing him for having "come back to her."

The record of the days, of the weeks, that ensued would be mere weariness. A portion of his mind had given way on that day when he turned down the street that led to the river, and that portion was never restored. It was miserable for the only two who were with him—his wife and Bligh—to see what was left of that mind grow daily weaker and weaker; to hear him talking in a way that they knew he would have utterly scorned himself for talking in, had he been conscious of it; to know that reason had deserted her throne, and that he could never now be "himself again."

Sad, miserably sad, to see him writing, with a shaking hand, words that could never be printed; to see him making these up, and counting the lines, and calculating the number of columns they would make.

It was very sad to see all this, and to feel themselves called upon to deceive him by pretending that his "copy" was sent, and inserted, and paid for, in order to give ever so small a gleam of satis-

faction to his poor mind. But through all the sadness, all the sorrow, all the biting, horrible despair of that time, the baby-faced beauty nursed him with a loving, untiring devotion that at last won him to know her.

She knew now that he had wrecked himself for another woman than herself. She knew that he had loved that other woman as he never could have loved her even had he lived—for he wandered much in his mind, and told the truth in his ravings. But this knowledge never embittered her—never rendered her one atom less tender in her devotion, less prompt in her service, less lovingly grateful to him for calling her to him constantly as he did with the words "Marian, pet."

They were often on the brink of bankruptcy, but Marian kept the fact of their being so from Stanley. She had come to feel that she was a sort of protecting power over this man—that she was stronger in many ways than he, and that it behoved her to guard him. The sense of being needful to him—the sight of his absolute reliance upon her in all things—the sad knowledge that he had none other upon whom to rely, and the almost equally sad knowledge that he had lost

his friends in gaining her—all these things strung her up to bear and to forbear such evils as none but those who have nursed the sick unto death in poverty can comprehend.

It was such a poor small bankruptcy, that upon the brink of which they were perpetually. They failed and fell short of such inglorious, such essential things. The great dread grew up in her heart that, brief as might be the time he had yet to live, he might be made to feel the want that was upon them in a physical way, that it was a terror to her to contemplate. But she kept up a bright air before him invariably, though generally he was not in a state to see anything with understanding—she kept up a bright air before him, and never suffered a tone of her voice to fall flat on his ear. It was only Bligh who saw the girlishness fading from her day by day—who heard the heart-wrung tones in which day after day she met him at the door, with the same weary tale of "Stanley being no better"—who knew that the baby-faced beauty was as true a heroine as any of the gallant women of ancient or modern times whose deeds have been sung melodiously.

Now that she knew that nothing could avert the doom that was upon her husband—the doom of early death—she grew very proud for him, and resolved to suffer anything, no matter how bad, herself, rather than make another appeal on his behalf to his family. She resolved upon something else too—resolved upon it with no flourish of trumpets—with no loudly-spoken oaths—with no callings of any one to regard with admiration the magnitude of the sacrifice she was determined upon making. She came to her decision with no outward sign, save an additional tightening of her lips, as she leant over him, bathing the poor head that had so little in it besides ache now. But she was very firmly set upon carrying out her decision, for all she made it so very, very quietly. The guard against possible communion with this girl which his brother's wife had wrought upon his family to erect was destined to be never tried.

Once and once only did Stanley Villars refer to the bright beautiful bane of his life after that visit of hers. "She never sent me those roses, you see?" he said, one morning, abruptly, to his wife. To which she replied, very sweetly, despite the

sore feeling that would obtain at hearing another woman mentioned in a way that proved "she" alone had occupied his thoughts.

"But she will send them by-and-by, Stanley, dear. I'm sure she won't forget them, you see!"

In order that he might be made to see that she had not forgotten them, a journey was made to Covent Garden as soon as Stanley could be left with Mr. Bligh. A journey made in despair, almost by a heart-sick little wife—a weary little nurse; and though the roses were dear that day, Stanley's eyes were cheered shortly by a group of them as freshly white, as richly crimson, as the bunch "Mrs. Claude Walsingham had sent to him first," Marian said, simply. From that day forth Stanley had no reason to complain that "she never sent the roses." The roses were always there, though Mrs. Claude Walsingham was in the Highlands enjoying herself very much; and poor Marian was often on the brink of bankruptcy. He hungered and thirsted for the flowers, in a way that made Marian lie awake frequently, during the few short hours of the night in which he did not need her to attend upon him, when she was free to take repose—in a way that made her lie

awake marvelling half fearfully as to how the supply should be kept up to the end—the woeful end that *would* come.

Claude Walsingham and his wife were having a very pleasant time of it in Scotland. The grouse were plentiful this year, and the dog Jack had lent Claude for the season was as good a pointer as had ever hooked his leg in the air, or done a field off into huge diamond squares with an equally intelligent fellow. The lodge Claude had taken was tolerably replete with creature comforts too. It was airily furnished, but there were no lack of soft seats in it, and now that Bella had Claude with her constantly, she did not care so much for books from Mudie's.

They were leading what Major Walsingham called a thoroughly "jolly" life. Bella did not knock up, and afflict him by a display of fine ladyism, as to fatigue, on or without the smallest provocation. She approved herself capable of taking a great deal of pedestrian exercise without being a mere sleepy nuisance in the evening in consequence of the same. They got on so well alone in the wilds, up in their Highland shooting-box, in fact, that the receipt of letters and papers

became a mere bore to them, and consequently they did not open the latter very often until they were three or four days old.

There were certain letters which they felt it to be their bounden duty to open and peruse, to read and inwardly digest, unpleasant as that duty was sometimes; and these were letters from the dowager Mrs. Walsingham. Claude's mother was desperately affectionate and discontented in her epistles.

"She calls me her 'dearest child,' and makes me feel like a criminal for being her child-in-law even," Bella said to her husband one morning, after reading a cross-barred letter in the palest ink, and with the deepest border of black that mortal eyes had ever beheld.

"Why?" Claude asked. "No, thank you" (as Bella made a feint of handing him the letter), "I never read plaid effusions."

"Oh! it's hard to say; the whole tone of the letter is calculated to depress the recipient; one has a vague sense of being guilty of some undiscovered crime while reading it."

"You may tell me the letter in brief bits—but mind, Bella, make them very brief!"

So cautioned, Bella commenced—

"Well, now, here she says, 'I went down to the Vale House yesterday, to see about things; it is time that at least my bed-room and *own* sitting-room (humble as they are) should be ready. I know it to be Claude's wish that, though very *differently*, I shall be *comfortably* lodged, so I did venture to tell Tompson to mend the bell in the sitting-room.' Now, Claude, fancy! as if your mother didn't know that she was free to have a whole peal of bells in every room in her house, if she liked."

"And free to ring her servants out of their minds, into the bargain," Claude replied, with a laugh. "What a lark, to be sure!"

"Ah! but a lot of it isn't a lark. Just listen to this: 'I remembered, when Farmer Hopkins and his wife (good worthy people) lived there, they were always complaining of the damp, and I took the precaution of wrapping myself up in my sable cloak, and putting on goloshes, before I went into the house. Something must have struck a chill to me, however, for I have a tickling in my throat to-day, that warns me of the approach of bronchitis, and a stabbing pain in my left temple,

that bids me beware of neuralgia.' There! I feel that these preliminary symptoms of your mother's will make my life miserable, Claude."

"You had better get to disregard them, my dear, that is all I can say."

"Do you really think the Vale House is damp?"

"Nonsense! damp—no!"

"Then why should Mrs. Walsingham go down to it 'in a sable cloak and goloshes?'"

Claude roared. "The damp is her pet grievance at present, my child; don't you want to deprive her of it until you're ready to give her another." Then he added more gravely, "You must know, Bell, that it is only to us that my mother will talk of the black beetles and the draught, and the damp, and the missing bells; to every one else the Vale House will be a little palace of delight."

"But hearing of all those disagreeables does exactly what she intends it to do—makes me feel guilty," Bella replied.

"Well, I hope to God you will never have greater reason to feel guilty about anything, my darling," her husband replied, opening the *Times* (that was several days old) as he spoke.

It is in the columns of this world-renowned institution that we come upon our greatest shocks in real life. There is nothing inartistic, therefore, in making the most severe shocks emanate from thence, in the mimic life with which it is the novelist's province to deal.

Claude Walsingham opened the *Times*, and after glancing over it for a couple of minutes or so, he let it fall with his hands on the table, and uttered an exclamation, a short one—"God!"

"What's the matter," Bella said. Then finding that he did not answer her, that he looked shocked into such pallor as she had never seen on Claude's face before, she jumped up and went over to him, and attempted to take the paper out of his hand.

"What is it, say? What is it, Claude?"

"Keep off for an instant!" he said; but he did not say it at all roughly. Her soul began to shake within her.

"Claude, Claude, tell me!"

"He's dead then!" Claude began in a loud voice, that ended in a big choking sob as his head fell upon his arms, and tears oozed from his eyes. Then Bella checked the utterance of the wail

that was in her own heart, as she bent over and attempted to soothe her husband in his agony.

He remembered all things with such a dreadful distinctness now. His boyish days with Stanley, and the friendship that had been between them in their riper years. He remembered how love had battled with doubt in their hearts. How Stanley had believed their compact to be too sacred a thing to be foully soiled; and how he (Claude) had falsified that belief. He remembered all these things well; but better than them all, he remembered that he had loved this man who was dead, and that this man *was* dead.

It was a crushing conviction. Do what he would now, the late hardness, the worse than indifference that he had shown, could never be altered. He was utterly bowed—bowed and subdued, as entirely as any woman could have been by the stunning weight of a most overpowering remorse. His superior scruples; his false fears as to future intercourse; his careful avoidance of contamination, were all shown to be uncalled for, unneeded, in such a solemn way, that the sight of that futility nearly burst his heart.

As for what Bella felt when she read the paragraph that had bent her husband's head, that may not be told too clearly. She had known, she had felt sure of "that" for some time which had come upon Claude as a shock. She was more than sorry, she was more than grieved! But there was just this unction which she could lay to her soul—she had parted from the dead man in kindness. Claude knew now that he had turned from Stanley in scorn, when, for his manhood, he should have gone to Stanley in humanity. Her husband's remorse took Bella away from too much thought of her lost lover's evil fate.

During the whole of that day Claude could do nothing but regret. He was as inefficient in his first sorrow as any woman could have been, as nervously uncertain "what to do at all" at first, and then "what to do for the best." The following day he vainly essayed to try and act as if this "had never been," to go out shooting as usual, to "shake off" the thought of that which had unmanned him. But he failed! He failed entirely. His better nature triumphed, and in the evening he said to his wife—

"Bella, dear! we'll go to London to-morrow.

I'll go—to—his funeral, and you shall see after his poor little wife."

They talked freely of the miserable business after that. Claude was all the loving old friend again, instead of being the successful, but, notwithstanding that success, the needlessly embittered rival. They made plans to assuage so much of Marian's woe as might be assuaged, and in speaking of her, Claude lapsed for a minute into injustice.

"Poor little thing! I pity her very much of course; but as she must have been utterly incapable of appreciating Stanley, I have not the least doubt that the consideration she'll receive as his widow will quite reconcile her to having been his wife for so short a time."

"I don't suppose she did appreciate him," Bella rejoined. She was conscious that she herself had not appreciated him, and she did not accredit Marian with higher powers than she had possessed in that respect.

The *Times* in which they had read of his death was five or six days old. Two more days were wasted in coming to a decision as to "what they should do." The result was that Stanley

Villars had been dead nine days when they came at length to the door of his house to inquire for his widow.

The little house looked very gloomy and desolate when the door was opened by an old woman, and they stepped in.

"Is Mrs. Stanley Villars within?" Claude asked, while Bella began to cry.

"Are you any relatives of the late young gentleman's what's gone?" the woman asked, dubiously, by way of answer.

Claude felt like a brother towards Stanley now; in addition to which feeling, he thought that it would save trouble to say, "Yes."

"Then I am to tell you," the woman replied, slowly, "that the young woman who lived here is gone away, and don't want to trouble you ever—no" (correcting herself) "I wasn't to say that—this is it, the young woman is gone away, and she wished it to be known to her gentleman's relatives, if they ever did chance to come nigh to inquire, while I was here, that the young gentleman never disgraced himself by marrying her—poor lamb!" the woman wound up with, heartily.

It was a staggering surprise to them both.

They could only ask a few incoherent questions, and then go away discomfited. As they were leaving the door, Bella said—

"Claude, she's a noble little creature, mistaken as she is."

"How do you mean? Poor girl! God knows I would have judged her leniently enough, and done anything for her," he replied.

"You don't quite see what I do, yet," she answered. "I feel as sure as that I'm your wife, that she was Stanley Villars'; it's all of a piece with her wishing one day that she could have been unmarried to him. She has sacrificed her reputation in order that his family may not think he disgraced himself by a low marriage."

As she was saying this, Lady Villars' carriage drew up; and her ladyship, robed in the deepest mourning, leant out of it to speak to them.

"Have you heard of our grief?" she asked, with a little quiver in her voice, that told its own tale of the tears that had been shed, and Bella saw that Carrie's fair face was almost seamed by sorrow.

"We have just been there," Bella answered.

"Of that too; but ours is a double grief,

Mrs. Walsingham; my little boy is dead," the poor bereaved mother cried.

Then Bella told her how her visit was well-intentioned, but too late. "Stanley's widow was gone," she said; and then she gave the message Stanley's widow had left, as it had been given to her.

"Who could have foreseen *this?*" Lady Villars cried bitterly. "It will half kill Gerald to find that he can't make *any* amends."

"She meant well, I have no doubt; but it was a very imbecile precaution to take, to cut herself off from her husband's family just now, for Bella says there is no doubt about the marriage. A very imbecile precaution indeed," Claude said sorrowfully.

"Very!" Bella said emphatically, "as all the precautions have been that we have all taken about each other; even those dear Stanley took himself, from the very first. We have all been on guard against the wrong thing."

"He is dead now, and the acknowledgment of it can't help him," Lady Villars said; "but we have all been horribly hard to him."

"Let his memory make us softer to those who

are left," Bella replied; and then they went their several ways.

But, for all the toleration expressed in Mrs. Claude Walsingham's speech, she could not forbear saying to her husband, when they reached their own house, and found Rock awaiting them ("a dog that had been left for missus by a lady in black," the servant said)—

"Claude! she is the only one who has behaved unselfishly in the business—how much better she is than any of us?"

In addition, too, it must be said, that the black beetles and the draughts and the damp sometimes bore hard upon her.

THE END.

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